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The Third Alternative

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& time

Russell Hoban
& strangeness

Patrick McGrath
& obsession

extraordinary new fiction by
Nicholas Royle
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& others

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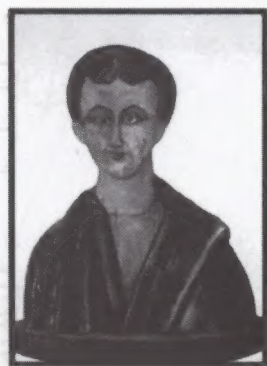
plus
Overdose
The Unquiet Soul



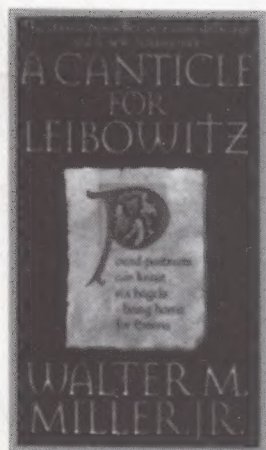
OUT NOW FROM ORBIT

One of the most eagerly awaited science fiction novels
of the decade

SAINT LEIBOWITZ AND THE WILD HORSE WOMAN



WALTER M. MILLER, JR.



The follow-up to the classic
A CANTICLE FOR LEIBOWITZ
'An extraordinary novel'

Time

'Angry, eloquent ... a terrific story'
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the above stand alone art is by Russell Morgan
all other images courtesy of TJA Press





editorial

It Went Missing

The following passage somehow went missing from Roger Keen's profile of Ian McEwan in TTA12 (between the last two lines on page 54). With apologies we print the missing section here:

...refuted all claims that he was a 'reformed character' and had permanently departed from the territory of gruesomeness.

The Innocent has something of the form of the espionage thriller; it is set in Berlin in the Cold War 50s and centres on Leonard, a young British telecommunications engineer, sent over to work on a massive anti-Soviet listening-in operation. He meets and falls in love with a German girl, Maria, and the initial stages of their relationship, leading up to Leonard's loss of virginity, are shown in meticulous detail, forming a complete second strand to the plotting.

Narrative accumulates, and apart from a bungled play-acted rape attempt by Leonard and its fallout, there is nothing much to suggest that *The Innocent* is a work of horror. Then 130 pages in, it changes — positively transmogrifies — into precisely that: a magnificent tale of gore and dementia worthy of the shiniest of shiny black covers.

Maria's former husband, a drunk called Otto, shows up one night and the three of them get involved in a terrible fight, the outcome of which is Otto's death. Leonard and Maria could argue self-defence, but they fear not being believed, so they resolve to dispose of the body, dismembering it and parcelling it up into two suitcases.

No detail, no observation of the physical and mental trials, is omitted in the grisly account which follows. One can feel the saw passing through the different textures of muscle, bone and tendon; sense the slipperiness of

the blood; share the practical difficulties of cutting the abdomen in half. The realism is completed by a commentary of Leonard's dissociated state; his manoeuvrings to avoid buckling completely under the stress and his flashes of horrific long perspective between the mind-blanking are spot on.

Yet again McEwan is very much at home with such material. Though *The Innocent* purports to be 'about' Berlin, East-West relations and spying, a completely different setting could have served, for the real subject of the book is the trauma, the inner devastation of people forced to participate in violence and death, and what they have to do in order to survive.

Leonard and Maria's relationship is rent asunder by their shared ordeal, but the story ends on a note of hope. In this respect the novel resembles *The Child in Time*, where Stephen and his wife separate because of the loss of their daughter, but are reunited when a new baby is born; and, to a lesser extent, *The Comfort of Strangers*...

Coming Soon

TTA14 could be seen as something of a Christopher Priest special, with

profile, interview and hopefully new story (the latter is still to be confirmed). Mark Morris and David Langford make their TTA debuts with magnificent new stories, and we're on a roll regarding talented new writers with Paul Meloy's first published story anywhere. We have an in-depth interview with Nicholas Royle and another feature highlights the work of Kim Stanley Robinson.

Congratulations

To Nicholas and Kate Royle on the birth of baby Charlie (incidentally, the wedding in Joel Lane's 'Keep the Night' [TTA12] was actually Nick and Kate's). One of Mat Coward's babies, 'Clean and Bright' [TTA3 and *Last Rites & Resurrections*], was selected for broadcast on Radio 4 (4th September at 4.45pm).

Congratulations also to Chris Bell, whose story 'The Cruel Countess' [TTA10] has been reprinted in *The Year's Best Fantasy & Horror* (St Martins Press, edited by Ellen Datlow & Terri Windling). That makes two year's running that TTA has had a story reprinted in this prestigious anthology. 'The Cruel Countess' can also be found in Chris's short story collection *The Bumper Book of Lies* (see elsewhere).

Featured Artist: Russell Morgan

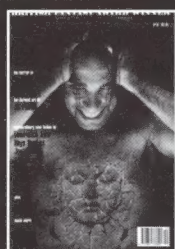
'Do you sleep at night?' is often the question Russell Morgan gets asked after someone sees his illustrations for the first time. Russell assures them that his nightmarish visions are only temporary.

1997 has been an unusual year for him so far, culminating in his first solo exhibition of paintings and drawings — 'Out of my Skull' — held throughout the month of May at Corby Library. He hopes it won't be his last!

Russell has illustrated stories for a great many magazines, both in the UK and the USA. He lives in Northamptonshire with his wife and two children.



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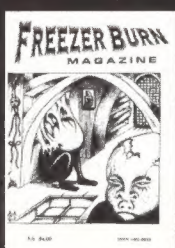
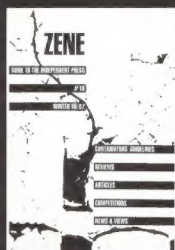
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Previous offers: **The Urbanite** and **Palace Corbie** sold out.



hunt

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Stories, artwork (samples, not originals) and ideas for non-fiction are welcome. Please study several issues of the magazine before submitting and always enclose return postage (overseas submissions should be disposable and accompanied by two International Reply Coupons). We are unable to reply otherwise. Always enclose a covering letter and send just one story at a time, mailed flat or folded no more than once. There is no restriction on length of stories but we are unlikely to serialise. No responsibility can be accepted for loss or damage to unsolicited material, howsoever caused. Submissions should be sent to the TTA Press address above

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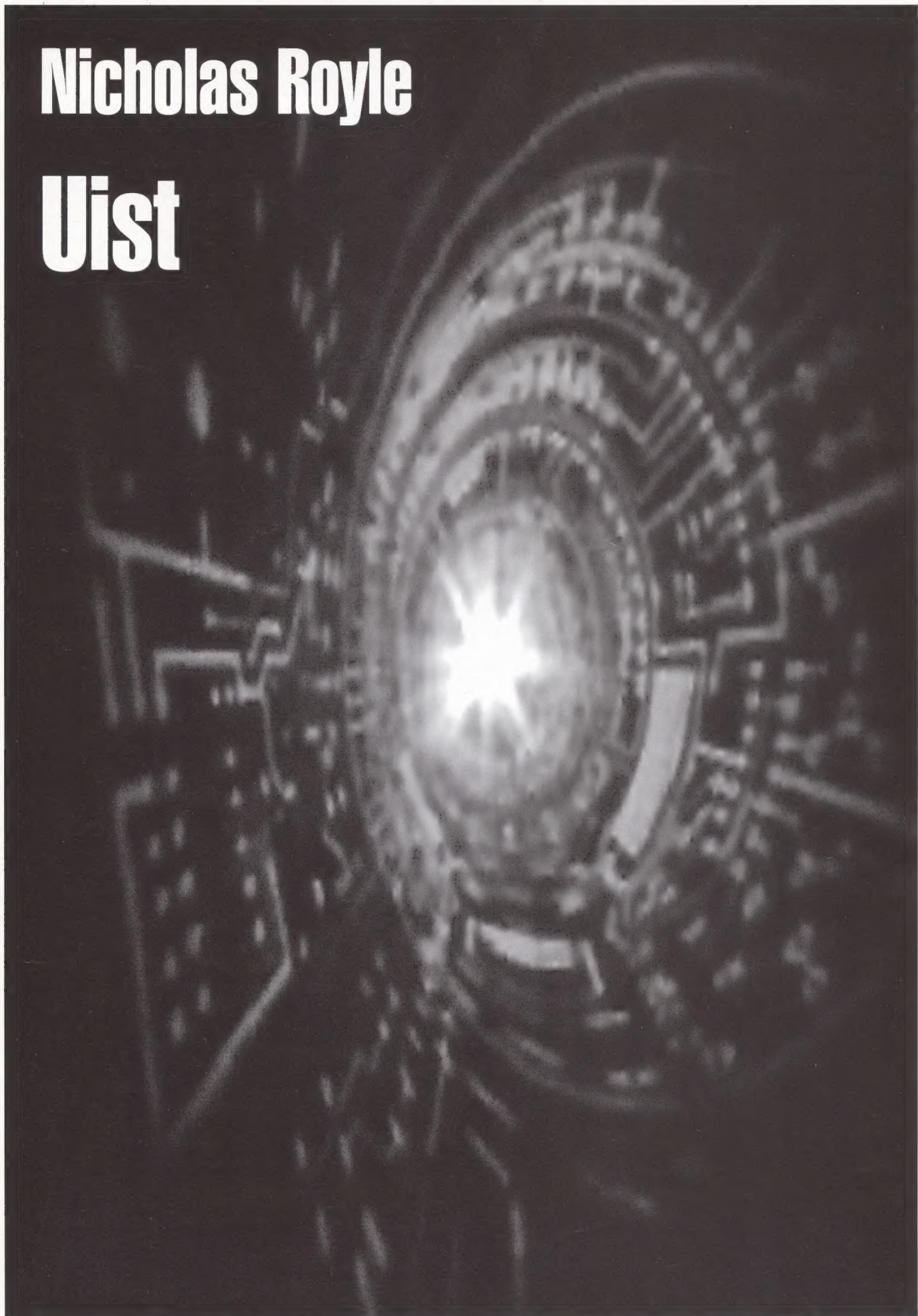
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Nicholas Royle

Uist



LESLEY AND I WERE NEVER ACTUALLY VERY close, so when she phoned me from Uist almost in tears and asked me to come up, I knew there must be something seriously the matter.

The matter, of course, was Sumner.

As far as I knew, she called him by his last name and always had done. I certainly had never thought of him any other way. He'd been Sumner at university and Sumner on the few occasions I'd seen him since.

"It's Sumner," she said, unnecessarily.

There was a long silence on the line. I suppose I was reluctant to be drawn into a domestic tangle, especially one involving Sumner. And Lesley.

"He's all right, isn't he?" I asked, it suddenly dawning on me I might be misinterpreting her anxiety.

"All right?" she scoffed. A bitterness in her voice told me Sumner wasn't terminally ill. Clearly, the problem lay elsewhere.

Silence again.

Finally, I said: "Why didn't you start a family?"

I don't know why I said that. It would have been much wiser to say nothing and eventually hang up. In the circumstances it was a remarkably thoughtless thing to say.

"What is the point?" she said, after a while, ambiguously.

I'D NEVER TAKEN SUMNER VERY SERIOUSLY, FOR the very reason that he took himself far *too* seriously. A shared interest in flight, given certain other circumstances, led us to the same aeronautics class, but while I was more interested in the theory discussed in the tutorials, Sumner preferred the nuts and bolts of the practical sessions.

I rarely saw him out of college, although I was once the only person he knew at a party in someone's shared house. He cornered me in the front room and asked me what had been my opinion of a lesson on gyroscopes we'd both attended. "That was over two weeks ago," I said.

"Didn't you think it was superficial?" he asked, undeterred. "It was so superficial. I mean, what Bounds told us you can read in any encyclopaedia, even a *schoolboy's physics dictionary*."

"I dare say," was all I could think of by way of response. "But isn't that the case with all organised education? You could do it yourself. Look it up. Read books. Most people wouldn't bother. That's why we go through the rigmarole of attending university."

"I don't think you understand," he muttered, gazing vacantly over my shoulder and fingering his drink.

My own polystyrene cup was empty. Was that a good enough excuse to escape?

"Bounds told us the things gyroscopes are used for," Sumner began again. "And left it at that. Just the things that they're *already* used for. I mean, that's not very adventurous, is it?" He gave me an inquisitorial stare. Out of the corner of my eye I'd noticed Jenny and another girl enter the room and look around. "Why didn't he tell us," Sumner boomed into my ear, making me jump, "what the bloody things *could* be used for?"

"Er, Sumner," I blurted out, catching hold of Jenny's arm. "Have you met Jenny? A friend of mine. We were in the same hall. And this is..."

"Lesley," Jenny said, smiling at me.

Sumner's face was a confluence of reactions. Anger at me for cutting him short and a certain delight, in spite of himself, at being introduced to the two girls. I made noises about my empty cup and slipped away. Sumner was hardly aware that I had left.

I DROPPED BACK INTO THE INSIDE LANE AND slowed down to sixty. The Mini could do eighty and keep it up until the tank was dry, but it wasn't a very relaxing drive. The vibrations became uncomfortable after seventy-five; any faster and the engine's constant scream threatened to become premonitory.

The trouble with the inside lane is that even going at sixty, the Mini still catches up with the Allegros and Reliant Robins far too quickly, and it's necessary to move back into the middle to overtake, but the middle lane is suddenly full of Cortinas, Dolomites and National Coaches, so you have to stay where you are.

With mixed feelings I pulled off into Watford Gap services. I squeezed into the last space between a T-reg Fiesta and a metallic-green Bentley. Standing at the urinal I thought to myself how it was the motorway services and not death that represented the last great leveller.

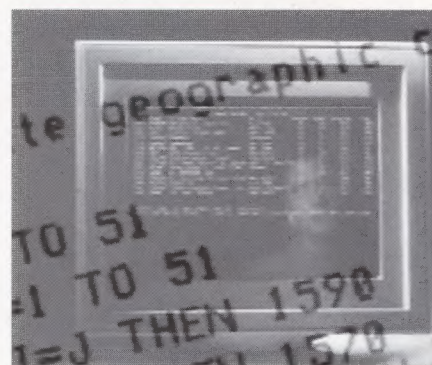
I purchased a cup of greasy tea and took it to the furthest corner of the cafeteria. Plants of rubber and cheese varieties fought for space on the window ledge. This was my last chance to turn back. Junction 17 was only a couple of miles away; I could turn around and go back to London.

Twenty-four hours after our telephone conversation, Lesley had rung up when I was out and left a message on the machine saying it wouldn't be such a good idea after all for me to go up; in fact, it would be much better for everyone concerned if I didn't go to Uist, and she was sorry for suggesting it in the first place.

Something about her tone persuaded me to ignore the message and set off the next morning anyway. She had been brave to ring me in the first place, and now her fear of a confrontation had got the better of her. I could just claim not to have got the message.

If I was honest with myself, I'd been waiting for an excuse to escape from London for a while. A couple of weeks before Lesley's call, I'd delivered the next three months' instalments for the ornithology part-work from which I was now receiving regular commissions. The chough had been mildly diverting, but the thrush and fieldfare which followed killed off my enthusiasm. I decided the shrike could wait and consequently sat around doing nothing for ten days or so.

I'd never been to Uist; I'd never seen a golden eagle; and I knew the elusive predator nested in the Hebrides, so this was an opportunity for me: I believe I was saying this to myself even as Lesley fought back her sobs on the telephone.



I drove straight past junction 17 and six miles later joined the M6.

THE LAST TIME I'D SEEN SUMNER WAS AT HIS invitation.

"I want you to see something," he gasped over the telephone early one Sunday morning. "I want to show someone." This last comment was delivered in such a faraway manner that I pictured him gazing out of the window, no longer conscious of the receiver in his hand.

"What is it?" I had to repeat before regaining his attention.

"When?" he continued after a short pause. "When will you come?"

I looked in my diary and saw that I was free all week.

"Thursday," I said, choosing it for no other reason than that it was four days away.

"Suit yourself," he snapped, "if you're that busy. Are you still *writing*?"

"Yes, I had a piece in the *Sunday Times* colour supplement. They even used a couple of my photos as well."

"Don't get that crap," Sumner growled.

"It pays the bills," I said with unnecessary self-deprecation.

But Sumner had already hung up.

It was a dull week and I was glad when Thursday came around. The clutch was slipping and I couldn't spare the cash to get it fixed, but it wasn't far to Wood Green. Lesley opened the door with a scarf around her head. I wasn't sure if she was going out or dusting the bookshelves down. In any case, and saying how surprised she was to see me, she asked me in.

"He's at his workshop," she said, as if he were bound to be and I ought to know.

We were sitting in a small, low-ceilinged morning room towards the back of the house. Breakfast pots still sat on a corner of the table. Somewhere, voices mumbled on the radio news. I sipped at my coffee. Lesley was looking at me in a way I could only describe as frank. I noticed she

seemed to be thickening slightly around the lower abdomen.

"You're pregnant!" I ventured.

Lesley just snorted and after a while said, "Chance would be a fine thing." Then: "Do you want another coffee?"

I left shortly afterwards to go and find Sumner. His workshop was a rented garage fifty yards down the road. I sensed movement inside, as if some great machine were turning. Gingerly, I tapped on the metal door. A moment later the door was hoisted upwards, without my having been aware of the cessation of the vibration I'd felt.

There were vices and clamps fixed to workbenches strewn with tools and shavings and strips of metal. A bright-blue model speedboat caught my eye, leaning in a corner, bow down.

"I used it for the engine," Sumner declared, following my gaze.

He shuffled a collection of papers on the bench and stuffed them into a cabinet mounted on the wall before stepping into the centre of the garage and beckoning me impatiently to come in. As soon as I had, he swung the door down. When he straightened up and stepped back, the bare bulb which hung from the ceiling haloed him. In the two or three years since I'd last seen him, his hair had taken a turn for the grey. His gaze shifted incessantly, as always, from my left eye to my right.

"You took your time," he said, sullenly.

I shrugged and looked around to avoid Sumner's penetrating eyes.

"You look as if you're busy," I said, blandly, drawing from him only a look of undisguised contempt. "So," I clapped my hands together, determined to remain civil, "what have you got to show me? I'm impatient."

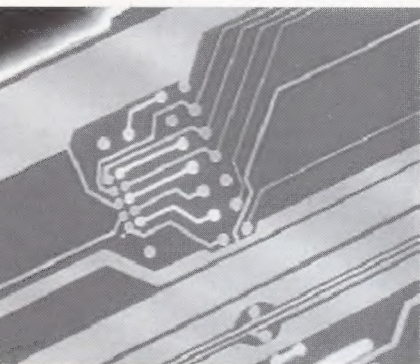
Sumner moved an inch towards the bench, then stopped and looked at me, as if sizing me up: was I really interested or humouring him? I nodded eagerly, which seemed to decide him. From the bench he took a rusty key and stepped into the shadows at the far end of the garage. I could just make out his bulk stooping over a dark shape; clearly, some kind of cupboard or chest. The old key ground in the lock and I heard him whispering curses until his efforts yielded a click and the door opened. He withdrew a glinting metal object and carried it towards the bench. It seemed to me he suppressed a grin as he placed the construction carefully down on the workbench and switched on an angle-poise lamp which he extended and pointed at his handiwork, for I assumed the thing was of his making.

I made a sort of approving noise in my throat and approached the bench to get a better look. Sumner's eyes switched from me to his machine and back again, manifesting both his pride of creation and his natural desire to ascertain my reaction.

I could only screw up my eyes and peer closer. I wanted to make some sense of the apparent confusion of wheels and axes, and discs and rods, that would obviously have interactive functions, but which remained indefinable as long as the contraption lay there immobile on the wooden surface of the bench. In a linear direction it measured no more than three feet, but since I could not imagine the machine's context in space, I did not know whether this figure represented length, width or height.

Sumner could sense my incomprehension. With a hint of impatience he brushed my hand out of the way and raised one end of the construction until the longest axis was vertical. I could now see that the machine was three feet tall and possessed one central shaft, crossed by three smaller axes each perpendicular to the next, at the ends of which were positioned wheels. All parts appeared to have been fashioned out of stainless steel.

"See that?" Sumner pointed into the middle of a grid-work of supporting rods. "That's the model powerboat engine. Now watch this." He bent over the machine and although I could not see, I gathered he was starting the tiny engine. Soon enough, after a couple of false starts,



there was an uninterrupted tinny buzz, like a large beetle in flight. Sumner stood to one side, excitement in his eyes like I had never seen there before. He was holding the top of the vertical axis to keep the machine steady. The wheels, all six of them, had begun to turn.

"The engine is just to get the wheels spinning," Sumner explained. His role now was that of teacher, so why did he remind me so much of the schoolboy he must have once been? Was it the mixture of eagerness and stubborn reluctance to both impart and receive knowledge that is unique to the put-upon adolescent? As I stared at him the years fell away and I could see him sneaking off to the library at lunchtime instead of kicking a ball around the park. Although it was not allowed, he took his briefcase into the library, for that was where his sandwiches were concealed. They too, of course, were strictly *verboden* outside of the refectory.

"Just to start them off, d'you see?" he reiterated. "After the initial boost, it's hardly required at all."

The wheels were spinning quickly now. Sumner let go of the machine and it remained upright, spinning faster and faster. I knew that such a small engine was not capable of making those wheels spin at such speeds; the machine was almost self-sufficient; acceleration occurred as I watched. Sumner had withdrawn behind me. The buzz of the model engine was now completely drowned out by a high-pitched whine produced by the wheels as they whipped the air.

Suddenly I felt uneasy. I wanted to turn around and look at Sumner but discovered myself unable to. I had the distinct impression that he also was contributing in some terrifying way to the din, which now filled the garage and reverberated off the metal door. The light bulb threw a shadow of his head on to the wall above the bench which was at best imprecise.

A new sensation added to my anxiety: I felt profoundly dissociated from my surroundings. If my memory can be considered at all reliable, this impression — of being cut adrift from the world of solid, immovable things — made itself felt at precisely the same moment as Sumner's mechanical construction rose from the workbench, hovered an instant and floated up and away at a tangent to the surface of the bench.

Mesmerised, I ducked out of the machine's flightpath just in time to avoid certain injury. Crouched on the floor I shook my head; the dizziness faded and left me feeling numb.

Sumner was clutching the machine protectively to his chest.

"Next time," he was saying, "I'm going to ensure the motor cuts out after sixty seconds. That way I'll prove my machine grows lighter under its own energy source. All gravity can do is produce a torque on the gyros. Hence the precession. That's why it goes up at an angle, d'you see?"

In fact, I didn't. I was more concerned with getting out of that garage right there and then. I could swot up on the long-forgotten technical definitions later. Sumner's machine had frightened me. Or the sensations attendant to its take-off had frightened me.

LESLEY DIDN'T SEEM SURPRISED WHEN I RETURNED to the house.

"He's still at it," I said.

"Oh yes," she said, closing the door behind me. "There are plenty of hours left in the day. He certainly won't be wasting them with me."

We were in the morning room again. The curtains had not been drawn. Evening was falling. The breakfast dishes had been taken into the kitchen, but not yet washed.

"Does he stay out there a lot?" I asked.

"All the time."

"Have you seen what he's made, Lesley?"

She looked me straight in the eye, when I spoke her name.

"If he talks to me at all, it's about his bloody machine."

I looked at the untidy privet hedge through the window. Why should I feel guilty? All I had done was introduce them to each other at a party, so I could get away from him talking at me. Having made the introductions, I had disappeared to the kitchen where I had allowed myself to be drawn into a facile argument about the relevance (or not) to contemporary life of pure mathematics. An hour later I had bumped into Lesley coming out of the bathroom. Sumner had had to leave early; something about his bicycle.

Lesley and I had spent the rest of the party sharing the last bottle of wine. Since at the time I lacked the vision to suggest we adjourn to a quieter room upstairs, we had to shout in each other's ears. I remember the hot smell of her neck, but nothing of what we said.

The day after the party I went away on a six-week placement. When I came back, I was astounded and dismayed, in equal measure, to learn that Lesley and Sumner had been seeing each other.

"What's the matter with you?" Lesley asked me. "Now you're looking gloomy."

Jolted back into the present, I realised I'd been staring at Lesley's stomach again and blushed deeply. I hoped she wasn't drinking.

"Shall I make more coffee?"

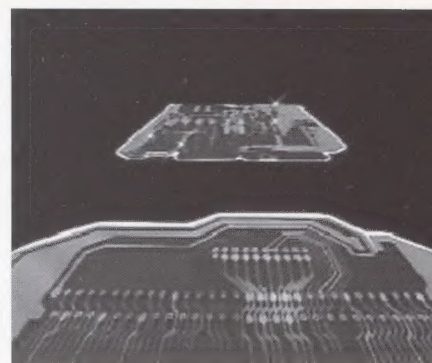
She stood up and approached the table to pick up the mugs. Her hip brushed my shoulder; she remained there for a moment or two. I felt that she was looking down at the back of my head, but she may just as well have been gazing out of the window.

"It'll be warmer upstairs," she said, as she carried two steaming mugs of coffee out of the kitchen and avoided my eyes.

Aware that my legs were actually shaking, I followed her up the stairs. If she was nervous I couldn't tell.

A gate clanged outside. Lesley stiffened. Footsteps came up the path.

"Quick," she whispered, having already turned round.



Luckily, the staircase was towards the back of the house. I ran down as quickly and lightly as possible. Lesley emptied the cups down the sink and eased the back door open. She pointed to the far end of the garden.

"There's a gate in the fence... I'm sorry."

SHE WAS, I THINK.

When I'd gone to see Jenny after discovering that Sumner and Lesley were going out together, she told me how she had always thought of Lesley as an 'earth mother'.

I could vouch for the fact that in one respect this was a good description of her. But the matter of her fecundity was to remain a mystery to me. Whose fault was it, hers or Sumner's? Or was it a decision they, or one of them, had taken?

Was the barren wilderness of their marriage at all related to the reason for my summons to Uist?

Or was it something more specifically to do with Sumner?

When I reached the shelter of the overgrown hedge at the bottom of their Wood Green garden that night, I turned and

looked back. A light came on in an upstairs curtained window. Lesley was still in the kitchen, with her hands in the sink. A silhouetted head and shoulders appeared in the upstairs window. The silhouette became less defined, as if several more veils had been dropped between it and me, or as if it were moving round and therefore constantly redefining itself. It began to spin — if indeed it was moving at all — faster and faster. In the kitchen window, Lesley had pressed her hands against her ears, screwing her eyes tightly shut.

All of a sudden, the ground seemed to give way beneath me. I collapsed at the knee and was thrust into a pile of mouldering leaves.

When my head stopped spinning and I was able to pick myself up off the ground, there was no sign of anyone in the upstairs window; and Lesley was getting on with the washing-up.

IT IS POSSIBLE TO THINK OF A SMALL TOWN as being more interesting than it actually is, especially if there are ferries that leave from there to go to other, even more interesting places.

I approached Oban on the A85, with a picture in my mind recalled from a childhood visit. It was a small but dense settlement driven into a steep narrow valley like a chock. From every point of the town you could look out towards the sea, except that the view was blocked by an enormous lump of land, only a few hundred yards away from where the ferries docked. You couldn't see how the boats would be able to get round the island, if it *was* an island. Unless, of course, the island was the ferries' actual destination; in which case, weren't the ferries a little large and why couldn't they build a bridge?

It had become suddenly dark just north of Penrith. It was getting late and the Lakeland overcast brought the night down around my little car more quickly. By that stage I had already compiled quite a long mental list of the shortcomings of making long journeys in a Mini 1000. Now I was able to add to that the fact that if it got any colder outside, the temperature inside soon dropped dramatically, and the heater simply blew cold. By the time I got to Oban my feet were like blocks of ice.

I tried to get some sleep on the boat, but once we steamed out of the Sound of Mull the sea was far too rough. Before long I regretted the foolishness with which I had decided that seasickness tablets would be unnecessary.

It was with infinite relief and unsteady clutch control that I drove off the boat when it docked at Lochboisdale, on South Uist.

I set off north immediately, having worked out from the map that the island was about twenty miles long. A causeway would take me on to Benbecula, a small circular island no more than five miles in diameter. I would then reach North Uist by means of a second causeway, and drive the ten miles or so to Hoe Beg, where, hopefully, I would find Sumner's croft without too much difficulty.

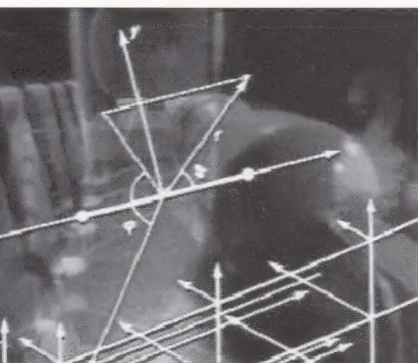
The enthusiasm I felt at being in the car again after eight hours at sea was soon worn down by the cold, the extraordinary darkness and the thick fog. I crawled along at fifteen miles an hour, concentrating on keeping to the narrow road. Unsuccessfully, I experimented with monopedal driving, keeping one foot on the accelerator while sitting on the other: accelerating with the left foot, however, proved disorientating, and if I kept only the left foot warm in preference to the right, the right seemed to get even colder still.

I was probably about half way up the island when I thought to look at the fuel gauge. It registered zero.

The four-gallon fuel tank was, of course, top of my list of disadvantages of long-distance Mini driving. The fact that it had not occurred to me to fill up to the brim while still on the mainland was not, however, surprising. Even now, the engine was sucking up the dregs at the bottom of the tank, like a child with a straw. Did I still have petrol in the jerry can in the boot? Or had I used it? I had filled up the tank and the jerry can and emptied both so many times on the journey so far, I had no idea whether or not there were any emergency rations still in the boot. Clearly, I couldn't stop to find out: there might not be any and I wouldn't be able to start the engine again. It was going to be a matter of luck. People said Minis ran on thin air; now was the time to find out.

I lost track of time and became aware at one point of an opacity in the fog that spoke of daylight. I kept my foot motionless on the accelerator, in the hope that the engine wouldn't notice all the petrol was gone. Between blooms of cauliflower-fog on my right I glimpsed choppy, grey water, and concluded I was crossing one of the two causeways.

Shortly after passing through the tiny settlement of Blashaval and turning right on to the minor road to Hoe Beg, the car spluttered, heaved and jerked like a rocking horse, made a final run for it, and stopped.



I sat still for a few moments, listening to the silence. I wound my window down to hear better. There was a stillness and unechoing calm that reminded me of the peaty expanse of the Black Hill. And a chill that brought to mind the Alaskan tundra. I wound the window up and reached over to the passenger seat for the map.

THE BAGS UNDER LESLEY'S EYES WERE SO pronounced, my first thought was that Sumner had been beating her. Soon I realised, though, it was lack of sleep that was bruising her.

"Lesley," I said, feeling a sudden rush of vain pity. "What on earth are you doing up at this time?"

"I told you not to come," she retorted.

I shrugged and stepped inside as she walked away from the door.

"He's not here," she said, picking up a crumpled blanket from a battered armchair facing the dying embers of a fire. She folded the blanket and slung it back in the chair, then made an effort to straighten her clothes, which were creased and awry.

I followed her into the kitchen where she filled a kettle and plugged it into the wall. Mechanically, she took two mugs from a cupboard, peered inside them and put them down on the draining board.

"Lesley." I wanted to ask how she was, why she looked in such a state. "Where is he?"

"Out," she snapped. "Sorry." She spooned coffee from a jar that was almost empty. "He's at his fucking *workshop*. If you can call it that. I don't know. I haven't even seen it. I don't bloody well want to either." She poured the water, splashed some on her hand.

I stepped up behind her and put my hand on her shoulder. She tensed.

"There's your coffee," she said, dismissively.

When we sat down, Lesley relaxed enough to explain that Sumner spent most of his time at his workshop. She had no idea where it was. It could even be on another island for all she knew. He sometimes stayed there overnight, or so she assumed.

"I haven't got the slightest idea what he's doing," she said.

I looked at her slumped in the armchair she'd slept in fully clothed that night. There was a haunted, pinched look in her face, yet she appeared to have lost no weight from her body. I am ashamed to admit that I desired her with a sudden ferocity. For me she had lost nothing of her sensualness. My response to being in her presence, I realised, was one of the few constants in my life, as if she were a planet, and I a satellite.

Selfishly, I thought how easy it would be to take her to bed and make love to her.

By now she was looking at me. I blushed, convinced she knew all that was in my mind.

WE UNEARTHED A CAN OF WHAT SMELT LIKE petrol in a shed at the back of the croft, and set off together to rescue my car. I thought the walk would do Lesley good. We drove into Lochmaddy and bought extra provisions so that I could be fed. Once or twice I was aware of

Lesley watching me while I was driving, but she made no conversation and generally answered my questions in monosyllables.

Sumner, Lesley explained, had converted the spare bedroom into a *study*. She pronounced the word with venom, as she pushed open the door and flicked the light switch.

The bed had been upended and pushed into a corner. A drawing board covered with charts, printed grids, set squares, rulers and an arsenal of pencils and pens slanted away from one wall. The carpet had been rolled up and a flat board laid down where the bed had been. There were various chalk marks on the board: a large circle, a number of crosses and dots, mathematical symbols, numbers and sums. On the floor, apart from dirty plates and coffee cups, were dozens of pages of calculations and equations, a pornographic magazine and a rugby ball.

Beyond the drawing board, by the window, was an old wardrobe. Without any feeling of guilt, I opened the door. Inside, I found the machine I'd seen put through its paces in Wood Green, two document wallets bulging with papers, and a device that looked like how I imagined a Geiger counter would look.

"He forbids me to come in here." The sound of Lesley's voice made me jump. She was standing over the drawing board. "I come in and have a look occasionally, but none of it means anything to me. You know, sometimes I think it's all nonsense to him as well. Like he's gone completely insane."

"I think perhaps we ought to get out of here," I said, sensibly, "in case he comes back."

I pulled the door shut, making sure it was properly closed.

The only thing in the room that had actually surprised me was the pornographic magazine.

"Why don't you leave him?" I asked later when Lesley had made more coffee and I was building up the fire with wedges of dried peat.

"Where would I go?" she answered straightaway. "I've got no money. It's all his. The house in Wood Green is in his name." She didn't have to go on. The academic qualifications she had were not much use to her as she approached middle age with no real work experience.

"Why on earth did you marry him the first place?" I blurted out before I could hold myself back, finally asking the question that had puzzled me for years.

"There was something charmingly naive about the student who took it all so seriously," she said, self-mockingly. "How was I to know that instead of growing out of it, his swotting would become an obsession?"

"Can't you divorce him?"

"He'd have to agree to a two-year separation first."

"Is there no chance of that?"

"Brian," she leaned forward, "he wouldn't let me go. He treats me like a piece of shit, calls me a fucking slut,



and yet, when he's here, and he's *not* in his study, he follows me around from room to room. He seems to need me. And I mean more than just to have his meals cooked and clothes washed."

I shook my head, unable to think of anything constructive to say. Was I not perhaps a tiny bit to blame, for standing by all these years and not doing anything?

"Is life *very* difficult with him?" I asked.

She treated my question with the contempt it deserved by not even bothering to answer it.

I HAD TO ROUSE THE OLD MAN FROM HIS slumbers in front of a blazing gas fire (surely hazardous in such a poky little hut) to get him to come and fill my car with petrol. He served me with the bad grace and surliness such as befits a person just woken up, and such as I expected to receive as a 'tourist'.

By day, the causeway linking North Uist to Benbecula is impressive. Above all, I was impressed that I had not rolled into the sea in the foggy hours of the morning.

I drove down the western side of Benbecula, past, first of all, an aerodrome, then through Balivanich, Griminish and Liniclate. These small settlements featured traditional crofts at odds with recently built council bungalows. On South Uist the A865 runs down the island like its artery, sending veins and capillaries off to the low-lying western side, where crofts, chapels and the occasional telephone box gather in clots too small and formless to call villages. I saw very few people; the silence was absolute. I almost felt I was corrupting its purity by driving a car through such landscape.

My attention was caught by a burnt-out croft on the right-hand side of the road.

Only out of the corner of my eye, therefore, did I see a large dark shape suddenly veer past the windscreen. I jammed on the brakes and the car stalled. Leaning across to the passenger side I saw an enormous bird flying slowly towards the hill on the left-hand side of the road. Grabbing my camera

from the back seat, I leapt out of the car and ran as fast as I could in pursuit.

It was a golden eagle. I knew it was, despite not having seen it properly and never having seen one before. Its flight lifted my heart into my mouth, snatching my breath away. I had to get closer and take a photograph. It climbed steadily as the hill rose more steeply and I slithered up the muddy slope. The distance was difficult to calculate but the bird's wingspan must have been six foot or more. I was losing ground. I looked up again. The eagle was just about to disappear over the top of the hill. I wielded the camera, fumbled the shutter-release and missed the subject by two or three seconds.

I cursed under my breath, which froze on the air, and turned to lean back against the grassy slope. The day was

now clear of mist and fog, and the view from up on the hill was magnificent. I could see collections of crofters' cottages strung out along minor roads and tracks on the other side of the main road. The land was a patchwork of blue lochans, most of them very small and irregular in shape. The sea and the sky merged, smudging the horizon. In the distance off to the north-west I made out one of the military installations evidenced on the map as being present throughout the islands. I wondered what they might possibly be getting up to that could be of any use. In the middle-distance I recognised the piping of larks. My car was a green dot on the metalled road.

A MUD-SPATTERED, MILITARY-GREEN JEEP parked outside the croft when I returned late in the afternoon warned me to expect Sumner.

I took a deep breath and knocked too confidently. Sumner came to the door himself.

"Cordery!" he exclaimed. "What brings you to Uist? As if I didn't know. Come in."

I shook his hand, relieved that his gambit left me no convenient space to fill with his name. I stepped into the cottage and looked around for Lesley.

"Where's Lesley?" I asked.

"She's in the kitchen. Where do you expect?" he said, implying she was there by choice. "Give me your coat." He draped it over the back of a chair, as if I wouldn't be staying long.

"What a surprise," he said, once I was warming myself in front of the fire. He obviously expected me to offer some kind of explanation.

"I've a piece to write on the golden eagle," I said, feebly. "They're quite common in the outer islands."

"It so happens," he said, ignoring my attempt to justify the visit, "that you've come at just the right time." He sat back in his seat and brought his fingers together in the form of an *arête*. "Almost as if you knew."

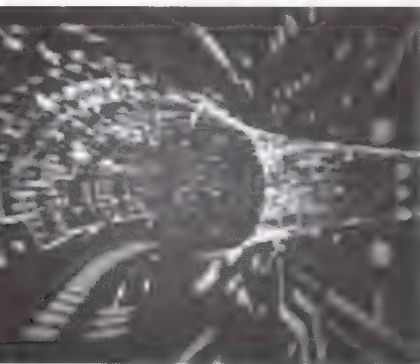
At that moment, Lesley came in from the kitchen. She greeted me in a subdued voice and threw a cloth over the table.

"Dinner's ready," she said.

Throughout the meal, Sumner talked about gyroscopes and their properties. At one point he got up, catapulting his fork on to the floor, and disappeared into the spare bedroom. Lesley picked up the fork and wiped it on her serviette; she avoided my eyes. Sumner came back carrying the rugby ball I'd seen in the wardrobe. He forked a potato to his mouth, without any acknowledgement to Lesley and, pushing his chair back, placed the ball on the floor. He spun the ball flat on its side. It gathered speed and visibly twisted in such a way that it rose and stood up on its end, still spinning.

"The effect of frictional torque," he said, losing a little gluey potato down the front of his jumper. "The spin vector chases the torque due to the applied force, which in this case is gravity, and the torque vector which is due to friction. D'you see?"

I indicated that I followed sufficiently for him not to have to reiterate, which, of course, was not the case. I hadn't looked at a physics book for twenty years. I waited



a couple of moments before telling Lesley how delicious the dinner was. Sumner, I noticed, was picking at his plate with his fork in his right hand. His chair was angled towards me and he kept his left elbow planted firmly on the table between himself and Lesley. He only took two mouthfuls of his pudding before pushing the bowl to one side and fishing in his jacket pocket for a toy-sized gyroscope. He wound a length of string around the shaft and set the gyro spinning on the tablecloth.

"Watch this," he said, almost conceitedly. He picked up the plastic ketchup bottle, flicking the cap to expose the small teat. Then he grasped the gyroscope and spun it. One end of the central axis came to a small rounded-off head. Sumner lodged this head in the sauce-bottle teat, the axis horizontal, the disc spinning at right angles to the surface of the table. The whole thing should have collapsed, given that the gyroscope's centre of gravity was hanging over thin air. But the gyro continued to spin and to describe a circle around the ketchup bottle, the end of the axis still resting in the little teat.

"Know what that is, Cordery?" Sumner asked. "Precession. Gravity applies a downwards force on the gyroscope, creating torque, the spin vector chases the torque vector and the gyro precesses."

I nodded slowly to give the impression I understood more than I did.

Seizing her moment, Lesley asked if we wanted coffee.

Sumner spun round on his chair as fast as his gyroscope and smashed his fist down on the table, causing all the crockery to jump and a cup to fall on the floor and smash. He bellowed: "Fuck off, bitch!" The look of ferocity and hatred on his face terrified me.

More frightening, however, was Lesley's reaction: she simply reached for his plate, placed it on top of hers and carried them into the kitchen.

Sumner stared after her and I studied the tablecloth, feeling faintly disgusted with myself.

SUMNER HAD SAID I SHOULD BE UP EARLY THE next morning and ready to go out. I hadn't known how to say no.

Lesley was already up. She looked again as if she hadn't even been to bed. With glassy eyes and a murmured response to my 'good morning', she scrambled eggs and opened a tin of beans. I didn't want to leave her and, more to the point, I didn't like the idea of spending the day with Sumner.

"I expect you'd like to see the other side of the island," Sumner said, as he turned right rather than left on to the main road. We rattled through desolate places with names such as Grenitote, Sollas, Malaclete. Under different circumstances I am sure the majestic solitude of the landscape would have made a positive impression on me. However, trapped in Sumner's Jeep I began to feel like a prisoner. We drove across on to Benbecula and down on to South Uist. At least I knew roughly where we were from my expedition the day before. The same features rolled past the window — lochan, side road, cottage, lochan, milestone, lochan — so that I had no idea how far down South Uist we had travelled when Sumner swung the nose of the Jeep

off the road and yanked on the handbrake. I didn't get out immediately. When he was several yards away he turned and beckoned me to follow. Reluctantly, I jumped down from the Jeep and marched into the wet grass. Part of me still wishes I hadn't done so.

We were heading towards the hills which rose fairly steeply from the plain a few hundred yards away. I hadn't yet made up the gap between me and Sumner, but he didn't need to look round to know that I was following. I made large strides to move quickly through the tall, marshy grass, trying wherever possible to place my feet on clumps. My breath came in short gasps and erected strange insubstantial scaffolds on the cold, damp air. Up ahead I could hear Sumner's waterproofs squeaking. The chatter of meadow pipits, the clatter of lapwings.

The altitude had been rising for quite some time before I realised we were climbing: I stopped for breath and, looking round, saw the plain stretched out below. Far in the distance, beyond the road, I made out three figures on a stretch of land sandwiched between two lochans. They were digging peat. One was actually digging the earth, another was stacking and bagging the wet clods, and the third person hefted the bags and carried them to a tractor and trailer that waited nearby.

I turned and looked up the hill. Sumner had stopped fifty yards ahead and was watching me. *What was going on?* I wondered. *What did he want?* Even at that distance I could feel his eyes on me like two insects. I screwed my eyes up to see better. He continued to stare. After a while he turned his bulk back towards the hill and began to climb. I think that if I had any battles still to fight, I lost them on that slope.

When I got to the top I discovered of course that we had climbed a mere foothill. The real thing reared up before us. Sumner had waited for me. When I got my breath back we set off together.

"That's Beinn Mhor." Sumner pointed up ahead to where the mountain disappeared into the clouds.

"Is that where we're going?" I asked, unsure what response I wanted to hear. In the event there was none: Sumner ignored my question, then moments later asked one of his own.

"Do you remember when you came to Wood Green?" he began, and my stomach turned over; had he come closer than we had thought to catching Lesley and me in the act we never even got round to starting? "Do you remember what you saw in my garage? Do you?"

"Yes," I said. "A construction of gyroscopes that when powered by a motor lifted off the bench and nearly took my head off."

"No," he said, raising a finger. "What you saw was the earth moving away from the gyroscope. The motor was



just to get the gyros moving initially and then to remove the effects of friction. The gyroscope didn't move away from the earth." He stopped and prodded his finger in the cold air. "The earth moved away from the gyroscope, while the gyroscope remained stationary in space."

"Really?" I said, to break the silence. "How is that possible?" "That is possible," he stated. "That *is* possible."

We started walking again, climbing all the time. I wondered what connection, if any, there might be between what Sumner had just said and the strange sensations of vertigo I'd experienced in his garage and at the back of his garden.

"So," I said, slowly working out what I wanted to say, "if your gyroscope was outside and you got it spinning like you did in the garage, it would rise into the sky and eventually leave the earth's atmosphere."

"It would remain where it was and the earth would move away. But yes, the net result is the same: at one point it would no longer be in the earth's atmosphere. Provided you got it spinning fast enough, of course."

The earth spins at 1000 miles per hour at the equator — with its own gyroscopic properties, obviously — and you'd have to be spinning a lot faster than that."

At that moment a lapwing flapped by a few yards away, crying its familiar 'peewit'.

"Keep a look out for golden eagles," I said, suddenly reminded of my quarry. Sumner muttered something to himself which I couldn't hear and walked faster. "What?" I shouted across the few yards' distance. He continued mumbling inaudibly. I ran to cover the distance between us and said: "What are you saying? I can't hear you."

Sumner flew round and screamed at me. "You're just the same as *her*. Just the fucking same."

"What do you mean?"

"You pretend to be interested. She doesn't even bloody well pretend any more."

"Sumner. Sumner, I am interested." I felt like a child who had disappointed his father. "I am. Don't fly off the handle like that. I am interested. I find it fascinating."

He was charging ahead. The air, now we were higher up, was noticeably more damp.

"She's a cruel bitch," he shouted into the mist. "She's done all she can to make my life a misery." Sumner was walking so quickly now, I had to break into a trot to keep up with him.

"Sumner," I said, bewildered by his outburst and more eager to normalise the situation than stick up for Lesley. But his walk became a run and I couldn't keep up. He disappeared into the mist. I told myself to keep calm and carried on walking in a straight line.

I walked for about five minutes before there was any change in my surroundings. An enormous wall of cloud materialised, as grey and threatening as the sea. I imagined

myself at the summit of Beinn Mhor, and on the other side was a sheer drop, hidden by this cloud. However, as I got closer I realised, it wasn't a cloud at all, but an almost vertical scree slope. Sitting on a boulder at the foot of the slope with his head in his hands was Sumner. Cautiously, I approached him. He lifted his face; it was wet with tears.

Not knowing quite how I was able to do so, I began to feel pity for this man. Was I so lacking in moral courage that my sympathies could switch at the mere sight of tears?

"She's such a slut," he said. "A filthy slut." His voice was edgy and broken. "The things she used to do to me." He shuddered. I thought about the magazine I'd seen on the floor of the spare bedroom. Suddenly, Sumner was looking at me through his tears, as if it was the first time he'd noticed me. He rubbed his eyes and stood up, then began to wander away from the scree slope. I followed, wondering if he knew where he was going.

After some time I realised we were going downhill and visibility was improving.

"We're going back," I said.

He shook his head. "Directly ahead of us is Hecla. Six hundred and six metres above sea level. Beinn Mhor is 608. The valley in between is perfect."

He seemed to be in control of himself once more, and consequently I had no idea what he was talking about. The gradient became steeper. Our path hugged the side of the mountain. Around the next bluff lay a surprise.

ON THE VALLEY FLOOR WAS ANOTHER OF THE islands' military establishments. This one comprised several Nissen huts, a number of Jeeps parked in a group, a large dull greyish-black ring, fat like a doughnut, and a few soldiers scattered about.

"What's that?" I said.

"It's two things," he told me. "But as far as *they're* concerned, it's a particle collider. I call it *Uist*."

We were down on the same level now. A passing soldier nodded at Sumner, glancing at me only briefly.

"What are we doing here?" I asked, stupidly.

"This is where I work. I'm in charge of a particle physics research project. We're based here to keep it secret. Both the Americans and the Swiss are working on similar projects, everyone looking for the same thing, and of course the British want to beat them all to it."

I stared at him in disbelief.

"How come we can just walk in?" I asked.

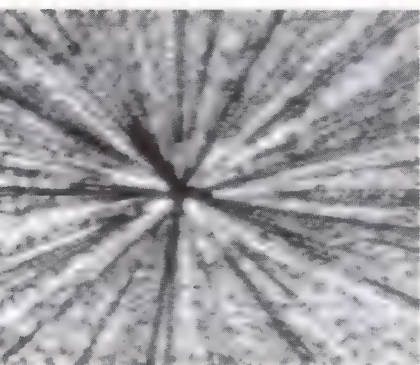
"It's quite well hidden, but they're keeping it low-key just in case. No excessive security. It's not a military project, after all. I don't know why they got the army involved. Suits me, anyway. They're all too thick to work out what I'm up to."

"What *are* you up to?"

By now we were standing next to the ring. It was supported on the ground, more than twice our height and about fifty yards in diameter.

"I'll tell you when we're inside."

Access to the inside of the ring was achieved via a portable gangway and an airlock system. We stood in a curved corridor. Sumner began walking to the left. I



followed him. We came to a control area. There were computers, dials, digital displays, four monitors and a hundred switches.

"So what is this?" I asked.

"Like I said, it's a particle collider. On the other side of this wall," he thumped the inner wall, "are two tubes which run right around the ring. They are constructed out of cermet, which, as I don't suppose you remember, is an extremely strong and heat-resistant ceramic. Inside one tube going in one direction are protons. Inside the other tube are anti-protons. They're travelling in the opposite direction. The crossover facility enables me to collide the two types of particle and create a controlled explosion. The particle accelerator follows the same principle as the linear induction motor... So, the controlled explosion... Provided the particles are accelerated to almost the speed of light, if you open the conjunction between the two tubes, you'll get an explosion which will reproduce conditions which existed moments after the creation of the universe. That's the idea, anyway. There'll be Higgs' bosons, top quarks, Z particles and all sorts of exciting things."

"And you're in charge of this?"

"I was the best man. Research fellow in particle physics at the top university department in the country. At the time I quite liked the idea of working for the government and had no objection to observing secrecy."

Sumner sat down in front of the control panels and flicked a number of switches. I tried to take everything in. I had actually read in the newspaper about the Americans and the Europeans, and how they were racing against each other to find these so-called Z particles by means of controlled explosions of protons.

"What are you doing now?" I asked him.

"Activating the accelerator in order to get the particles up to speed. Since I've virtually been given a free hand on this, I've been able to design the collider to suit my own needs." He looked at me appraisingly. "You haven't worked it out yet, have you, Cordery?"

"I think I understand," I said.

"I don't think so," he said, with a detectable sneer. "Two streams of particles travelling round in a circle at the speed of light? Plus my little *design extra*: portals through which I can expel particles, *while they're travelling at the speed of light*. The portals are situated on the underside of the ring. Think of the thrust two short expulsions of particles will give me. But that's just an added extra," he pressed more switches, spun a dial, "like the model powerboat engine, d'you see?"

It had begun to dawn on me before he spelt it out with the model powerboat engine. I suddenly became very frightened.

"You mad bastard!" I said.

He responded by making further meaningless adjustments to the instruments on the control panel.

"You can't do this," I cried. "No way. Have you any idea what'll happen when you expel those particles?"

"There will be significant radiation at ground level within a radius of approximately two hundred metres."

"You're insane!" I was shouting now. "Completely fucking mad!"

"No!" he shouted me down. "You're jealous. You're so pathetically jealous because I've found a way out of this fucking shit. You can't bear the fact that after all these years I'm getting it right. You're just like *her*."

I looked at the controls but Sumner guessed my intentions.

"It's too late, Cordery. Once it's started it's too late." The vibration was quite noticeable now. "If you do anything now, I've only got to open the portals and keep them open, and the whole island's finished." There was a violent shudder followed by increased vibration and noise. I looked at Sumner. "Lift off, Cordery," he laughed. "Lift off, fuck off! Unless you want to stay, of course, while the earth moves away."

I took my cue and sprinted round the corridor. Perhaps he wasn't going to let me get off. There was no sign of the airlock. It was hermetically sealed. I was trapped with Sumner until one of us ate the other. Daylight appeared. I ran towards the doorway and tumbled out, falling only a few yards back on to the hard ground.

My head spun faster and faster as I watched Sumner's enormous gyroscope rise ponderously from its resting place. I shielded my eyes a split second before it happened, but it was no kind of protection. Sumner opened the portals and jetted two streams of particles at the ground. They clearly had already attained light-speed: the glare seemed to burn through my lids and scorch my eyeballs.

IT'S NOW JUST OVER TWO MONTHS SINCE THE

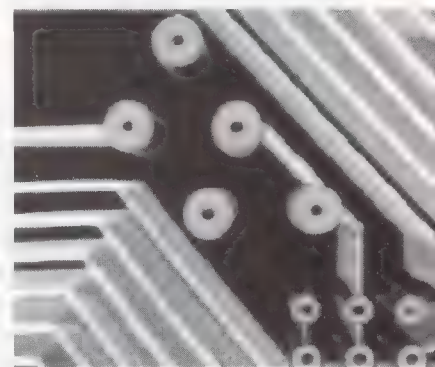
earth moved away from Sumner. I often think about him. Is he still alive? Did he have a food supply on board? Does he regret doing something that can't be undone? The fundamental thing about a gyroscope, of course, being that the direction of the axis of spin will always remain the same.

Perhaps, for the first time in his life, he's happy. Sometimes, despite his selfish cruelty and its devastating effect on Lesley, I find myself hoping that he is.

Lesley and I sleep together, but generate little of the excitement we once thought we had a right to expect. It is functional and we provide small comfort for each other. Occasionally her hand comes away with a clump of my hair and I am uncontrollably sick in the morning.

I have raised my voice to her only once, when I caught her in the spare bedroom. She said she wanted to clear out all of Sumner's 'rubbish'. I had to forbid her to touch any of it. Now, in the evenings, while she sits at the window looking out, I study Sumner's pornographic magazine as closely as I pore over his fat folders full of notes, searching for some hidden clue to his insanity.

NICHOLAS ROYLE's new novel *The Matter of the Heart* is published later this year by Abacus. We have an interview with him in our next issue.





RUSSELL HOBAN AND THE REASSURINGLY STRANGE

'In Dock 14 (there's no 13); *Clever Daughter*, a deep-space Corporation tanker, a huge battered thing like a discarded oil refinery all pocked and pitted from the dust and flying debris of seven galaxies, dull metal shining in the rain. Nothing sleek, nothing aerodynamic — it doesn't need to be smooth and sleek like those old ships that went up on a pillar of fire and five million pounds a minute. *Clever Daughter*'s bound for Morrigan in the Fourth Galaxy with 500,000 hectolitres of protomorphic acid for De Groot Draconium.' (*Fremder*)

To suggest that the sf mystery *Fremder* is a surprising departure for 71-year-old, Pennsylvania-born Londoner Russell Hoban — whose other novels might best be described as 'Magic Surrealism' — would be rather like claiming that Salman Rushdie had experienced a spot of bother over *The Satanic Verses*. On the other hand, even the names used in this brief quotation instantly welcome Hoban readers to his unique, universal vision. In *Fremder*, deep space positively sparkles with unexpectedly jewelled fragments. Snatches of songs by the likes of Jagger/Richards, Hawkwind's Bob Calvert and Dave Brock, Steely Dan's Donald Fagen flicker through the chapters like twinges of memories submersed in our experience, never quite resurfacing fully. There are unexpected — yet curiously familiar — characters (at least for the enthusiast): ludicrous film director Gösta Kraken, the Vermeer Girl and German poet Rainer Maria Rilke from *The Medusa Frequency*; the pump attendant from Edward Hopper's painting 'Gas', who made a brief appearance in *The Moment Under The Moment* ... yes, it's all reassuringly strange.

Fremder is by turns hilarious, profound, absurd, enigmatic and compelling. It is this extraordinarily well-crafted mirroring of existence that Hoban's fans find so vital; you can tell that this is an author who has agonised over every word, and yet never allowed his well-honed craft to intrude upon the most important aspect of each of his books: *atmosphere*; shaded, in Hoban-language, with hues of purple-blue.

There is a clarity to Hoban's writing, an acute attention to detail, leaving one with an impression of motion becoming stillness. He suggests that the best use he can make of his ubiquitous yellow A4 paper is by attempting to enlarge 'the limited-reality consensus'. Like the LBT (the Little Black Thought), the LRC is a virtual character lurking in the shadows of Mr Hoban's best work, a reminder that most of the Action in our world is 'ungraspable', thus helping to make that Little Black Thought less soul-destroying.

Russell Hoban's reality is simply less limited than most.

To ask where reality begins and ends, why reality suggests different things to different people at different times, demands the definition of a framework — and the only one we have is constructed from words. Hoban deals with this matter of a language-base in *The Moment Under The Moment*, proposing that the world ('although my royalty statements indicate that it doesn't as yet recognise the need...') lacks writers prepared to take risks in expanding their imagination, to record images that appear beyond where we ordinarily look, to seek: '...words that twist and moan and dance and sing behind the words that go out through our mouths, and the unknown words that we sometimes almost hear from far away...'; 'To me it



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by
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seems that everything that happens is language, everything that goes on is saying something'.

This tenet vibrates like a crystal from pages in which we hear the clanging of the brute bell of the universe, the baying of the end of the world wolf. Hoban is at great pains to summon the crucial Moment; that special, elusive instant which is drenched in the supernatural: 'Here and gone, the music; the mind shielding it from the winds of forgetting, holding what is partly now and partly remembered'. (*Fremder*)

It is the Moment that Hoban pursues relentlessly in his work; a point at which the veil between one form of being and another becomes tantalisingly filigree: 'Early on in my childhood I sensed the thinness of reality and I became terrified of what might be on the other side of the membrane: I imagined a ceaseless becoming that swallowed up everything... Each of us is the forward point of a procession stretching back into the darkness. And even within oneself, every moment is a self that dies: the road to each day's midnight is littered with corpses and all of them whispering'. (*Fremder*)

Mike Petty of *The Literary Review* suggested that Hoban be made available on prescription. During the writing of *Riddley Walker* — five-and-a-half years and fourteen drafts — even the author resorted to treatment: visiting a psychoanalyst every week to read aloud each phase of the novel; justifying this on grounds that his brain, being the tool of his trade, ought to be regularly serviced.

The ideas threading through Hoban's work — from the lowly ambitions of wind-up toys in his children's classic *The Mouse & His Child*, to the stories of knife-fights and analyses of fairytales in *The Moment Under The Moment* — create so rich a pattern as to recall the abstract lion hidden in the mosaic tiles of an Antioch piazza in his fifth adult novel, *Pilgermann*, and described as enabling one to see: 'Thing-In-Itself'. No coincidence, then, that blocked writer Hermann Orff (whose name, the first syllable — the head — of Orpheus, is another Hoban obsession) turned down a TV offer in *The Medusa Frequency* because he 'had too many other things to wind up', or that failed pilgrim *Pilgermann* was frustrated because 'Sophia and my little son ... had come thus at the eleventh hour to interfere with the smooth and orderly winding up of my affairs'. We are deliberately reminded of those clockwork mice in their quest to be 'self-winding', independent. His books form one shifting, mysterious design which, looked at from the right angle, emphasises aspects previously unnoticed. In turn, the links between the books successively add perspective to the vast picture that emerges when pattern becomes consciousness; the living heart of the mystery.

Critics claim that Hoban's personal language-base is tantamount to trickery, and yet surely idea pheromones extend from every book (not merely his own) to those minds that wish to connect with them. Numinous images seek us out through aeons of darkness — whether they are cave drawings or numbers on a manhole cover. What Hoban does so compellingly is to make us feel good about the notion that we belong to a community of perception and emotion. He quotes Schroedinger's 'The overall number of minds is just one', and asks us whether it feels like that to us: 'To me it does. I feel inhabited by a consciousness that looks out through the eyeholes in my face and this doesn't seem to have originated with me. I feel like a receiver made for a transmission that was going on long before I arrived'. (*The Moment Under The Moment*)

Language is everything; as soon as we begin to talk or to think, we give our mind-pictures names. Hoban does this by stretching familiar terms over unexpected contours. Being a master of the conflict between physical and metaphysical, he acknowledges that novels are more than the sum of their parts: '...a story is what remains when you leave out most of the action; a story is a coherent sequence of picture cards'. (*The Moment Under The Moment*)

Here is a writer who recognises that nothing is simply one thing. In the post-Apocalyptic *Riddley Walker*, his Little Man the Addom is literally torn

apart by the paradox: 'I wan tu go i wan to stay ... I wan tu dark I wan tu lyt I wan tu day I wan tu nyt ... I wan tu woman I wan tu man ... I wan tu plus I wan tu minus I wan tu big I wan tu littl I wan tu aul I wan tu nuthing'.

It is a language corroded by jargon, obliterated place-names and vulgarities hauled through mutated generations. Yet there is a primordial wisdom in it; a behind-the-eyelids sensation; a memory of a time when words may have signified what we no longer know how to describe — or perhaps even why we would want to describe it.

In that unnerving, somehow wonderful moment while struggling for a word which seems eradicated from our consciousness (like children striving to evoke a sensation for which they have no name); before revelation; before the cogs turn, enabling the teeth to take hold and Word to fall like a jackpot; it is in the instant before mystery expires that we find ourselves in the world of Russell Hoban. Recognising that everything is extraordinary, his humorous observations of the mundane navigate us to special states of mind: 'This will bring us down to fundamentals: I have a Gillette Techmatic razor. The blade is a continuous band of steel, and after every five shaves I wind it to the next number. Number one is the last, which is of course significant, yes? Then I stay on number one for ten, fifteen shaves maybe, before I get a new cartridge. I ask myself why. There you have it, eh?' (*Kleinzeit*)

In the very first paragraph of *Pilgermann*, that ill-starred search for Thing-In-Itself, he gives us this sentence, inversions as magical as the aura it casts: 'Twilight it was, the dying day shivering a little and huddling itself up in its cloak. Suddenly there came flying towards me with a mouse dangling from its beak an owl, what is called a veiled owl, with a limp mouse dangling from its cryptic heart-shaped face'.

Even readers who connected with that post-nuclear Huck Finn, *Riddley Walker*, were liberated by *Turtle Diary* (adapted into a screenplay by Harold Pinter for a fairly accomplished film version starring Glenda Jackson and Ben Kingsley); or who found laughter to be a better medicine than the 2-Nup administered to the hospitalised *Kleinzeit*; may not yet have braved the journey to Jerusalem in *Pilgermann*.

Pilgermann's is a private conversation with the universe and yet it is also the heart of the pattern, the cornerstone of Hoban's body of work to date and the true *magnum opus* among his novels. In it, even accounts of inhumanity in wartime are imbued with a need to push through the tissue that separates what 'happens' from the (perhaps even more absurd) universe on the underside. During the lengthy siege of Antioch, starving Crusaders are forced to eat the horses that carried soldiers of their own colours to their death. Slain, these horses become a larder for the survivors: 'The shocking thought arises: how much better off everybody would be if the Franks would go away somewhere and butcher their horses and live quietly on the meat'.

His books are replete with a sense of subjects being described for the first time, seen by eyes which are in love with seeing. The world's surface is less slippery with his help and its inhabitants need his support. Reality continues to roll like a horde of rogue marbles beneath our feet, but at least between his pages we feel that for a few moments we can grasp onto some stray fronds of life's substance.

We're talking about alchemy in its highest form; words forged, veneer of 'truth' buckling in the heat to illuminate the ungraspable: that meaning is a limit. If ungraspable, why bother even trying to write about it? Will anybody read it? Well, we should at least try; to approach the precipice, look over the edge to seek words that can carry us to the place where 'the unwordable happens off the page'. Above all, we must be prepared to let them take us there.

The route is being mapped from a desk in a house overlooking Eelbrook Common at the Fulham end of Kings Road in London. Russell Hoban wants you to meet him at least half way there, and his world is waiting for you.

'The fires col my storys tol.'

THE MOUSE & HIS CHILD

Faber, 1967

THE LION OF BOAZ-JACHIN AND JACHIN-BOAZ

Cape, 1973

KLEINZEIT

Cape, 1974

TURTLE DIARY

Cape, 1975

RIDDLEY WALKER

Cape, 1980

PILGERMANN

Cape, 1983

THE MEDUSA FREQUENCY

Cape, 1987

THE MOMENT UNDER THE MOMENT — Stories, a Libretto, Essays & Sketches

Cape, 1992

FREMDER

Cape, 1996

The Healing



Clifford Thurlow

SUSAN SCREAMED AS THE FIRST OF THE GOATS rose over the front of the car and glanced off the windscreen. The second glided across the bonnet with a tragic cast to its glossy eyes and Roger thought of Magdalena in the Afghani coat they'd found in the Oxfam shop in Fulham.

"What did I say," hissed Susan as he juddered to a halt.

The rest of the goats were leaping the stone wall beside the road, his attention drawn from this display to the figure approaching around the bend, a tall man wearing an embroidered waistcoat, a dense moustache and an ambiguous expression.

Roger got out of the car. Two animals were dead. A third gazed up, before dropping its head into the dust. The goat-herd slit its throat and with the pungent smell that rose into the air was a swarm of flies that appeared so quickly Roger wondered if they'd been breeding inside the beast's skull. Blood expanded in a puddle, engulfing his trainers.

The man dried the blade on the animal's coat. He spat on it, giving it a more thorough clean, his movements precise, as if he were showing a disciple some arcane ritual. He said something in a deep, operatic voice and held up three fingers.

Roger stuck his head through the car window. "Have you seen the phrase book?"

"No," Susan answered.

He found it among the maps on the back seat. "I'm sorry," he said in Greek.

The man shrugged. He bent down, drawing Roger closer, the smell of olives and feta on his breath making the act intimate and somehow intimidating. In the dust he wrote a number, then a word beginning with a triangle: a D, for drachma.

"What's happening?" Susan called.

"I've got to pay for the dead goats."

"What? How much?"

"Forty thousand drachs."

"Forty thousand," she said. "What's that?"

"About a hundred pounds."

"That's ten pyorrhoeal mouths. I'm not paying it, Roger."

"We have to."

"The animals were all over the road. It's his own fault."

"Susan..."

"No, Roger. Tell him to fuck off."

"I can't do that."

"You coward." She got out of the car and started waving her hand as if at a bothersome fly. "No, no, no," she said. "*Ochi drachma.*"

"We have to pay," he said.

"No, Roger. No way."

He looked back at the Greek. He was staring at Susan, a smile revealing even white teeth as it spread over his lips. He said something that sounded like a curse, then approached Roger with an intense look he mistook for anger. He thought he was going to punch him, but the goatherd did

something even more unexpected; he gripped Roger's arm, nodding in the way of a comrade about to follow him to battle. He turned away, dragged two of the dead goats into the shade below the wall and slung the third across his shoulders. As he strode off behind the rest of the herd, he could have been a character from the Old Testament.

They got back into the car.

"That's the way to deal with these people," Susan said.

"You would say that."

"Oh, fuck off, Roger."

He turned the ignition key. Nothing. He tried again. Roger closed his eyes and waited for her to say something. She must have known that and so kept silent.

"I'll go for help," he said.

"And leave me here?"

"Come with me."

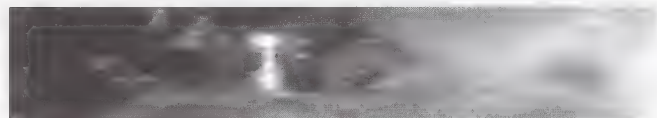
"Are you joking?"

"No, I just thought..."

She put her finger to his lips, shutting him up, a gesture he'd never liked.

"Susan, I wish you wouldn't do that."

She handed him the phrase book: "*I'm sorry*," she aped.



THE GOATHERD WAS AT THE TOP OF THE HILL sloping up from the road, a rocky pasture that appeared to climb into the heavens. The sky was the same depth of blue as the animal blood; rich and primary, shades of mythical quests: Magdalena with grave lips and a nervous smile: three weeks of classes, a kiss too far after the barbecue, the perfumed letter Susan had opened. Roger had known it was risky, like taking the corner too fast, but sometimes you feel like putting your foot down, asserting some of the primordial genes teaching and life lobotomized.

He took a deep breath. The air tasted untamed and ancient, seafood baked in garlic, oven warm bread, bitter lemons. As the goats moved into the distance the sound of their bells grew sad and mournful, a death knell for some part of himself, an ideal, perhaps. He'd never killed anything bigger than an insect before. The cloying heat of the afternoon had waned to congenial warmth. Mosquitoes were waking famished from their slumber and hummed about his ears. He reached a junction where he was unable to read the signpost, but the turn promised a destination in two kilometres.

The road became a track carved into the rock. The horizon stretched abruptly before him, as if the world ended at this point. He imagined something significant lay ahead, that he was returning to somewhere familiar, something lost. The track descended through a narrow gorge that opened into a hamlet invisible until the last curve of the road. Whitewashed houses like tombstones tiered the barren slopes. Fishing boats rocked at the water's edge. Dusk had claimed half the village, the sun dragging its shadow into the hills like a woman trailing a coat from a nightclub. The square was a boot sale of rickety tables where men of striking similarity to the goatherd and each other sat below

the eucalyptus trees drinking retsina. They watched with open curiosity as he passed among them and entered the bar.

The barman was drying glasses, a white moustache golden with nicotine hovering about his cheeks like a device to keep away flies, of which there were many. Another man had followed Roger inside. He was a big, muscular individual with arms too big for his shirt sleeves and a rustic smell.

Roger faltered over the phrase book, pointing at the telephone, dialling in mime. The barman carried on with his task, spitting in the glasses, polishing them with a filthy cloth.

"You German?" the barman asked.

"No, English."

"I am in Melbourne twenty years." He shook his head as if he found this hard to imagine.

Roger explained the problem with the goats and, as he did so, the barman neglected his task to pay closer attention.

"Yes, yes, goats!" he exclaimed. His eyes, black pearls in a mesh of wrinkles, had sparked to life.

The idiot grunted. "Goats," he said, shifting his weight restlessly from one foot to the other, sniffing all the time.

"How many you kill?" asked the barman.

"Three."

"How much you pay?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing?" He threw up his large hands.

"It wasn't really my fault. The goats were all over the road. My wife was terrified."

"You have a wife," the barman said thoughtfully, pausing to mull over this additional factor. He then said something to the idiot in Greek.

"Goats," he said again, and both men laughed.

"You English clever," the barman added. He was smoothing down his moustache, lips pursed, as if in satiric deference to Britannic guile.

"I have to call the car hire company," Roger explained. "The car won't start."

"No problem."

Roger ordered a beer and the barman made the call for him. The simian fellow was still sniffing. He moved closer, took Roger's glass and drank the drink down in one gulp.

"Hey, what are you doing? What is this?"

The barman hung up. "Don't mind Ari. He don't have a lot up here," he said, tapping his head with two fingers. Then he clutched his groin with both hands. "He make up for it."

Ari reached for his own groin and made a savage noise that amused the barman.

He opened another bottle for Roger. "They come tomorrow. Lock car. Is safe. They come here." He rapped the wooden bar top with his knuckles.

"You have rooms?"

"Very clean," he said defensively, "with shower."

As Ari wandered out, the barman whispered: "He okay, no problem."



SUSAN GLANCED INDIFFERENTLY ABOUT THE room, closed her eyes and took a long, vociferous breath through her nose. "Thank God it's only one night," she said and slumped down on the bed.

Roger dropped the bags he'd been carrying and gazed out the window. The bay was a long, natural harbour, the rocks on each side like womanly curves as they rolled into the sea. The sun lingered over the hills.

"Come and see the sunset."

"That's all I need."

"It's beautiful here."

"I hate it."

"And the people don't even speak English."

"Fuck off, Roger."

He turned back to the view. Bands of purple and orange streaked the sky, the curl of the waves red like painted lips. Some kids on motorbikes roared in circles. A woman in a white apron was emerging from the bar with retsina slurping from aluminium pitchers. Roger bit the joints of his fingers where the mosquitoes had bitten him.

"Would you like to go for a drink?" he said.

"Would you like to go for a drink," she mocked.

"Susan, let's make an effort?"

"You're pathetic, Roger, do you know that?"

"Can't we forget it?"

She stood, hands on hips. "I can't," she said.

"Then how can you expect me to?"

"You bastard, I hate you." She swung at him, snarling. "Bastard."

Roger stepped to one side, avoiding the blow. He approached her again, reaching for her bare arms. "I didn't mean it like that," he said.

"Liar," she spat.

She pulled away, turning to inspect herself in the mirror, leaning close to study her eyes. She stared at him in the reflection.

"I suppose you think trying to grow a beard makes you look more sexy. Well, it doesn't."



THERE WAS NOWHERE TO EAT IN THE VILLAGE except the bar.

"Best fish on the island," the barman said, making a thumbs up sign. "What your names?"

Roger told him and he repeated them, rolling the vowels. "Roger and Susan," he said. "In Australia they call me Spick."

They all shook hands. Spick's wife appeared with a jug of retsina and a plate of pistachios. They introduced themselves a second time.

"I'm Daphne," announced the woman, lowering her eyes as she spoke.

Roger filled their glasses. He could hear the faint lilt of female voices drifting from the radio, something eastern and seductive, a reminder that the island was closer to Istanbul than Athens; the people were Greek but Turkish blood ran just below the surface, rising up in angular features, in their dark, sensuous eyes.

The lights in the trees gave the square a festive air and made the hills beyond seem darker. The motorbikes were parked in a row on the harbour wall like greyhounds in traps. He watched a boy lift a girl over the water's edge. She wriggled. He put her down. She slapped him. Then they kissed, gluing themselves together. Susan had been observing the same scene.

"She'll fall in love with him, then he'll fuck up her life," she said.

She sat back, legs crossed at the thighs, her foot rocking idly. She was enjoying herself, he thought, feeling obscurely superior, sipping her drink.

"This stuff tastes like resin," she said. "Don't they have anything else?"

"I'll ask if you like."

"Don't bother."

On the breeze was the smell of warm rocks and lazy days, the languid lap of the waves. There were no other tourists. There was nothing to see. Nowhere to go. The village was just a cleft between two hills, a quiet, brooding place growing sultry in the twilight.

"Look, Susan, there's no point being bad tempered. Let's make the most of it now we're here."

"I hate this country."

"You liked it last time."

Her expression grew surly. "It was our honeymoon."

"I thought we could start again."

She leaned across the table, staunching his words with her finger. "There is no starting again," she said and looked out to sea.

Her sealing his lips was like something else had been closed up inside him. He drained the drink in his glass and filled it again, as he'd kept refilling Magdalena's glass before they'd wandered away from the bonfire. They'd kissed for the first time. He ran his palms over her back and he could remember the feeling, a tingling like the shock from a car battery. She'd shivered, touched by the same sensation, and wanted more, a promise, a future, a letter on pink paper.

"What are you thinking about?" Susan asked.

"Dead goats," he replied, and she glanced away again.

Spick and his wife were moving among the tables. When they stopped to chat, Roger noticed all eyes turning good naturedly in their direction. Everyone seemed to know everyone else, old women in black, fishermen in berets and high-buttoned shirts. The men slyly admired Susan's tanned legs. She had hiked up her skirts as if to show a glimpse of treasures forever beyond their reach.

Some fishing boats with yellow lamps fixed to the cross spars were chugging out to sea, motors thumping. The smell of the air was crude and passionate. It made him feel in touch with something that had grown distant, that part of yourself the grind of the predictable hones inevitably to nothing.

Roger became aware of a presence behind him and turned. Ari was standing at the back of his chair staring at Susan, a grin on his fleshy lips.

"What do you think you're looking at?"

Susan spoke in a loud voice; so English, he thought. She had folded her arms and held her head to one side.

The sun had bleached her hair and her eyes were shiny with irritation.

Ari made a grunting sound.

"He's okay," Roger said.

"You're friends?"

"He was in the bar. Spick said he's okay."

"Well, if Spick says he's okay, we should ask him to have dinner with us." She stared back at Ari. "Sit, sit."

Ari grunted and started hopping from foot to foot.

"Please, Susan, don't. He's, you know..."

"A moron?"

Roger shook his head. Ari carried on with his little dance until Daphne arrived and shooed him away.

"He okay," she said. "No danger."

On the table she placed plates of fish doused in olive oil. She departed and came back with salad sprinkled with feta.

"The fish is cold," Susan said.

"We're in Greece," he reasoned.

"It's pure magic: they cook it in there and it's cold by the time it gets out here."

He watched her pick at the food until she pushed the plate away. Susan had become lean and angular on a regime of mineral water and malice. It suited her.

He drank most of the second jug of retsina and realised by the time he had drained the last glass that a numbing pain was spreading through his skull. The motorbikes had started up again, roaring in circles. His head was the Wall of Death. His throat felt dry and in the moment suspended between sobriety and inebriation there was a breath of clarity, then it was gone.

"You're drunk."

"And you're beautiful." He studied her in the glow of the fairy lights. "Tomorrow, I will be sober."

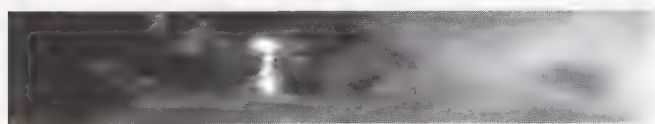
She looked away.

"Let's make love," he said.

"Are you mad?"

"Come on," he pleaded.

She stood. "I hate it when you're drunk."



ROGER SAT SLUMPED OVER THE BAR DRINKING coffee. There was a fly-flecked mirror behind the bar and he kept glancing up to make sure it was his own image that glowered back at him. The beard he'd always fancied had practically grown overnight. The threadbare carpet of his chest was a new Axminster.

He ordered another coffee, burning his fingertips on the glass. The Turkish music he'd heard the previous night was on again and he wondered if time were standing still, or if the old bakelite radio always played the same love songs. The sun was striking the sea like a knife blade, the spangles of light pressing against the soft tissue behind his eyes.

He had slept restlessly dreaming he was in a dark building with high walls and no doors. Through the cold air that moved about him like mist he could see three goats suspended from meat hooks. Their back legs were

tied and their throats had been slit open. He brushed flies from his face. His trainers were submerged in blood. He glanced down and, when he glanced up again, he noticed that the furthest hook held a naked girl, her body stretched out, her long hair sweeping the floor. As she slowly turned, he realised that her entire face had been cut off in one clean slice. A man approached, walking slowly. He spoke Greek but Roger understood perfectly. *It's a disease*, he said.

The dream flooded back into his mind as Susan entered the bar. She appeared from the narrow stairway the same moment that Ari came through the main door. She was wearing a white top scooped low at the front and a red sarong revealing a long leg in a sandal tied with thongs. It struck Roger that one bare leg was sexier than two.

"Has the car come?" she demanded.

"No, we've got to wait."

Ari approached and touched her hair.

"Get away. What do you think you're doing?"

Ari said something and the barman laughed. "Is okay. You have good smell."

"I smell like a goat from that bed."

She moved to one side, stretching her back. As she rolled her shoulders, a drill from the workout tape, her breasts rose over her shirt top. Ari watched appreciatively.

"I'm dying for a swim. Do we have time?" she asked.

"Swim, swim. No problem," said the barman.

Ari plodded out behind her like one of those dogs that carries its lead in its mouth.

"Shoo," she said. "Shoo," and he grinned.

"I think he likes you," Roger remarked.

Lines punctuated her brow. Susan studied him as if he were a stranger, then marched off towards the sea.



AS SHE SLICED THROUGH THE WATER, LEAVING barely a ripple, he played the Todgeworthy Game: he pretended he had never seen her before and gave her a seven on the Roger Good Fuckometer, Susan's attitude cutting a point from the looks department. They had known each other since school, the timid girl from the lower sixth maturing disdainfully amidst the decay of a career in dental hygiene. He was her only lover. His score was five and he recalled them all, every peculiarity and detail, every touch and taste from Zoë Curtis on the couch with her parents upstairs, to the long drought that separated Susan from Magdalena, a solid nine.

Susan cramped her toes as she emerged from the sea and moved gingerly over the rocks to the spot where they'd made camp. She wrung water from her hair, then released it in a long swaying curtain.

"That man's watching us," she said. Roger followed her gaze. "Look, he's sitting there with his mouth gaping open."

"He's catching flies."

She took one of her sharp, inward takes of breath as she spread out her towel, bending her knees, then dropping to

her stomach. She unfastened the bikini top, turning awkwardly to rub cream on her shoulders.

"I'll do that."

"Okay," she said.

Roger smoothed the lotion over the nubs of her spine. There were two dimples in the taut flesh just below her waist. He ran his hands under the elastic of her briefs. He felt her tense, then calm again.

"Careful," she said.

He massaged her shoulders, working his fingers down her back, each stroke pruning away the little triangle of pink cotton. He was aware of her complicity in this manoeuvre, and wasn't sure if this were merely the punishment in a new guise, or a display for the creature looking down at them. The dark slit between the domes of her bottom grew deeper. Roger could see the idiot, his tongue hanging out, his body shaking.

"That's enough," she said, as if reading his thoughts. She pulled the bikini bottom up again.

"I'm going for a swim," he told her.

She glanced up. "Don't be too long," she said.

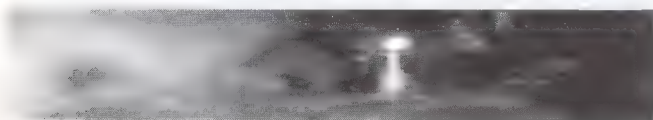
"Okay."

She was studying him like a child discovering a dead bird, staring at his chest, at the matted hair on his arms and shoulders, at his dark even tan.

"You're turning into a monkey," she remarked.

"Eek, eek, eek," he replied, hammering his chest as he loped down to the sea.

Roger had never been a great swimmer but he plunged in and over-armed across the bay without getting a cramp. He swam back, floating idly, staring at the sky. He wasn't sure why, but Ari watching as he'd peeled off Susan's clothes had given him an odd sort of thrill. He felt aroused even now, in the water. The hot sun and the sense of being cut off from the world was uncovering something life as a teacher had slowly smothered.



SUSAN WAS LYING NAKED ON THE BED, EYES closed. She was deeply tanned except for the white strips framing her pubic hair. Her breasts were brown with small pink nipples.

He had returned to the room from the shower and was drying himself. He had shaved finally, leaving a moustache that gave him a resemblance to Kolokotronis, the patriot who drove the Ottoman army from Greece. The hair on his body appeared to be growing ever more copious but he couldn't do much about that.

"Susan, you're in the middle of the bed."

"I'm sleeping."

"Move over or I'll climb on top of you."

"Don't even think about it."

He threw the towel over the window. The sun was piercing the shutters in golden bars, striping her body. "You shouldn't lie around like that," he said. "It's not fair."

She opened her eyes. "Not fair?" she repeated.

"Move over."

"I'm sleeping."

"Move over, Susan."

"Sleeping is life. Everything else is just waiting." She opened her eyes again, her lips curling with distaste as she stared at his erection. "You can put that away," she said.

He dressed before bending to kiss the raised silky mount of dark hair, lingering a moment, breathing her perfume.

She rapped his head with her knuckles. "Out," she said.

"You should lock the door," he told her, and left the room.



THEY SAT IN THE SQUARE, SUSAN'S MOOD RE-fecting the weather. Dark clouds were gathering across the hills. The car had not arrived and she was chastising him with silence.

Roger drank slowly and ate black olives, rolling them around his mouth before biting down on the voluptuous flesh. He noticed the goatherd staring at them from a nearby table. The man made a comment and the men he was with sat back in their chairs laughing. He then ambled off eating a ripe peach, the juice dripping down his waistcoat. He smiled at Roger and Roger gave him a wave. Susan snorted.

The moment Spick placed their food before them, huge raindrops began to fall in rhythmic thuds. The fairy lights danced in the trees. Lightning flashed, unzipping the sky and releasing a thunderclap that howled like a beaten animal. They hurried in with their plates as the storm scraped all colour from the night.

The square cleared, the men moving into the bar with their glasses. Only Ari remained. He was standing on the harbour wall, his arms outstretched like a devotee in some pagan rite. As the waves washed about him he looked like an old marble statue in the eruptions of blue light.

"What's he doing?" asked Susan.

Roger was absently turning the tips of his moustache as he watched. To him, Ari appeared to be in touch with something simple and forgotten. "He looks like a Greek god," he said.

Susan glanced at him sideways. "You like these people, don't you?"

"Sure, don't you?"

"Not much." She stood. "I'm going to bed."

"Don't go."

"Why not?"

"I don't know. You should stay. It's beautiful here."

She looked back out at the bay, at Ari praying to ancient deities, at the night's spirited display. "It'll be just the same upstairs," she said.

She walked out and he remained watching Ari in his ceremony with the storm. The lightning kept flashing, the thunder continuous. The bar was quiet, the men staring out into the night with awed, expectant expressions.

A car appeared, breaking the spell, the rain like silver nails in the muted headlamps. It stopped close to the bar and the driver entered in a panic. Everyone started

shouting at once and the men hurried out, running off into the night. The barman locked his till.

"What's going on?" Roger asked him.

"Your car here," he said, pointing at the vehicle.

"I don't understand."

"Fishing boat. On the rocks," Spick said.

He followed them out and got into the car with Spick, the driver and another man. Ari had turned away from the sea. Their eyes met for a moment and Roger saw in his features a look of complex reckoning, like a child with long division. The car turned and he was gone.

They drove out on the narrow road to a track that corkscrewed around the coast. Other cars had got there before them and the men were clambering down the cliff-face towards a boat wedged among the rocks.

The rescuers swam through the waves for the ropes the crew on board were throwing out. They worked as a team, as if the exercise had been rehearsed, each man aware of his task and performing it without pause or complaint. Roger helped secure the ropes the swimmers brought to land, lashing them to spurs of rock, the lines spinning out in all directions until the vessel resembled a fly trapped in a web. The rain felt like razors striking his face. The sea was pounding the shoreline, fists of water that charged into every fissure and crevice in an incessant, ramming motion. Roger was wet through, the salt spray and sparks of lightning like drugs entering his bloodstream. The wind blew the dust from his eyes so that the night's every detail was revealed in intense clarity.

Even as they laboured, the storm began to abate. The waves grew smaller, spitting weakly at the rocks, as if some longing had been pacified. Once the boat was safe Spick wanted to leave. They found the driver and the three of them made their way back up the cliff. As they were driving back around the coast, Roger saw Ari bounding along, his long arms swinging.

"Look," he said, pointing. The old barman's smile vanished. He spoke to the driver and the car skidded to a halt.

"No problem," he said. He opened the door, delaying to add: "He go off sometime. We don't see him for weeks." Spick tapped the side of his head and hurried off.

As soon as they arrived back at the square, Roger raced into the bar and up the stairs. Susan wasn't there. He checked the shower before returning to their room. The shutters were open, the moon's glow white on the sea. The bedside table had been knocked over, spilling the lamp, the alarm clock, some books.

He went down to the bar. It was in darkness, empty but for the car driver. He was sitting on one of the plastic stools, a cigarette putting a frisson of light in his eyes. He handed over the car keys and thrust a form at Roger which he signed without reading.

Outside, he called Susan's name and was answered by the far away rumble of the storm as it rolled out to sea. The village was deserted, the night hot, the ground already drying. Roger had decided to follow in the direction in which he had last seen Ari, when Ari appeared from the narrow street behind the bar. He was out of breath and stood there, hopping from one foot to the other. Roger approached.

"Susan? Have you seen Susan?" he asked him.

"Goats," Ari replied.

"No, no. Susan. My wife?"

Ari grinned, pointing into the hills. "Goats," he said again.

Ari made his way to the car and Roger followed. They got in and Roger took the winding road out of the village, stopping at the spot where he had crashed the first day. The broken down car had gone. There was no sign that it had ever been there, no sign of an accident. He stared up the hill where he had watched the goatherd carrying the dead animal across his shoulders and had the same feeling that had come to him when he first entered the village, a sense of the past and future being indivisibly linked.

Ari was gesturing wildly. They got out of the car. Roger climbed the wall, Ari following him up the hill. Tiny moons reflected in the eyes of the goats grazing on the pasture. They paused momentarily to watch them pass, moving on in concentric patterns as if one had a knock-on effect to the next.

From the crest of the hill he could see a stone hut behind a clump of trees, the lone window yellow with light. Behind the chime of the goat bells and the puff of Ari's breathing, Roger could hear a muffled sob that grew louder as he neared the hut.

The yellow window was the size of a television screen. He peered in and the sight that met his eyes could have been a scene from a film, the row of candles, as if before an altar, Susan stretched out naked, face down on a sacking mattress, the goatherd sitting in the solitary chair whittling a piece of wood. He was staring straight out at Roger as if he'd been expecting him. He was also naked, but it was so natural Roger barely noticed.

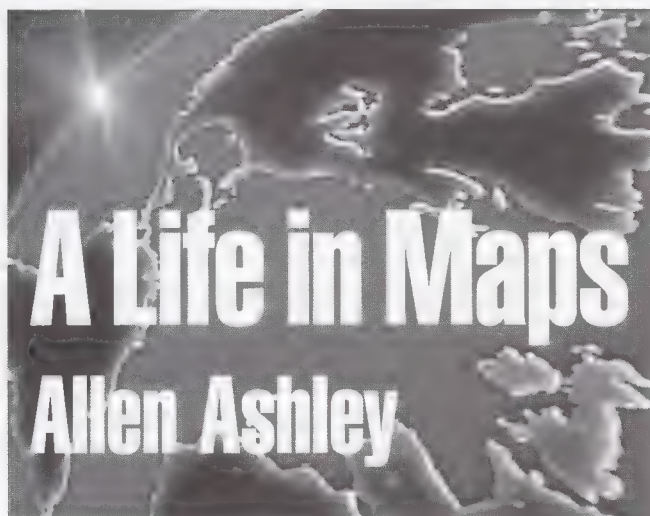
The goatherd raised a finger to his lips. It was Susan's gesture and mitigated any anger Roger may have felt before it could rise up in him. The man motioned with his arm, rolling it over Susan's body in the way of the carpet salesmen he had seen in Istanbul.

As he entered the hut, Roger had that calm feeling that comes from having reached a decision. The man pointed the tip of his knife at his tee-shirt. Roger removed his clothes. They were wet still. His skin was electric, the hair over his chest and down his arms like coils of copper wiring. He glanced at Ari. He was a portrait framed by the window. Susan continued whimpering, her head buried in the hessian sacks. She had always been very English in her demands and it was fitting with the Greeks watching to satisfy his own, which he did, thinking briefly of Magdalena, and then about nothing at all.



CLIFFORD THURLOW has written two biographies, a diet book and, arriving in Germany as the Berlin Wall was falling, his travel book *Brief Spring*, co-written with the Canadian Iris Gioia, which was described by Brendan O'Keefe in *The Observer* as 'a journey realised in fascinating detail by two sensitive and humane writers'. His heart, though, belongs to fiction, and he is proud to have published stories in *Defying Gravity*, *Story Cellar* and various small press magazines.





I HAD MY ONE REALLY BIG IDEA AT THE AGE OF fifteen. I carried it through the rest of my teens, hinting at its importance during job and university interviews. Like an old Western card shark, I only revealed enough of my hand to show there was substance to my thinking. I tried all the more creatively receptive colleges but no one wanted to know. Or maybe *they* were shielding their cards, too. Eventually I was approached by a man in a bar — oh, high melodrama! — and ‘advised’ to apply to join an obscure branch of the British civil service. “At last!” I breathed, expecting rapid recognition and fast track promotion. In truth, my appointment was to a poxy little side office at The Department with only infrequent pen pushing assignments to keep my mind from wandering. Bitter? Like lemon and vinegar, I’d say.

Geography, and more particularly cartography, is prime among the humanities. There is no chicken and egg nonsense here. The defining moment arrived when some arrogant cave dweller walked out across the savannah or the frozen tundra and indicated to all and sundry, “This here is my territory.” The map — the representation of and definition of an owned and known place — predates all human history. What else have we fought for all these years?

I READ WIDELY IN MY YOUNGER DAYS. OTHER worldly adventures such as the *Narnia* or *Lord of the Rings* series. I photocopied and enlarged the frontispiece maps, keeping cartographic track of the characters’ progress as I turned the pages. There was never enough detail so I took to adding, or often *making*, my own. Later, I had a couple of these efforts printed in the sixth form magazine. I hoped such fame might find me favour with the girls but typically it had the opposite effect. These days my younger self would be pejoratively described as an ‘anorak’.

Eventually I grew disenchanted with literature. The basic premise of most texts — the mystery, the conflict, whatever — seemed to revolve around the absence of adequate maps. How much simpler it would all have been if Hansel and Gretel had seen the legend, ‘House Made of Sweets/Witch’s Cottage — steer clear’.

If history is written by the victors then geography is surely written by those who expect to win. Modern warfare is all about knowing exactly where your enemy’s weak spots are. From the Second World War to the Gulf War and beyond we’ve been able to say, “We will blow up your weapons dumps, obliterate your grain mountains and take out your temples. Your economic well-being and moral fibre is at our all seeing mercy.”

The American failure in Vietnam was largely down to not knowing where all the gooks were hiding. With the supreme advantage of satellite surveillance and heat imaging equipment, The West is unlikely to make the same mistakes again.

I MET AND ENSNARED MY WIFE MARY THROUGH my geographical skills. She was a typist in an insurance company: quiet, pretty, unlikely to talk to strange young men on her way to and from work. To gain her attention — and later her affection — I had to render myself familiar. I was between college courses at the time and able to observe her regular passage, noting her route and daily routine with the finest detail. It was easy to contrive that our paths should cross with ever increasing frequency. That was only the start of the campaign, of course, but the moral of the story is: the army with the superior maps wins the virgin territory.

I’m very keen on morals. I have never *known* another woman and trust that my faithfulness has been mostly reciprocated.

I WANTED TO TALK INTELLIGENTLY TO THE PEOPLE at work but if it didn’t concern television, football or big tits they didn’t want to know. I tried some of the posher newspapers and magazines but a different type of snobbery was in evidence there: namely, “No poxy PhD from some gayboy university? No public theorizing!” I seriously considered so-called vanity publishing. My ideas are worth broadcasting, surely? If only they could be reduced into the hook-line/catchphrase/sound bite culture of popular music, showbiz and politics. Maybe... I’m working on it.

I read a book about the cave paintings at Lascaux and felt so angry at the author’s misrepresentations that I felt compelled to put the record straight once and for all. Received wisdom is that these are figurative stories, possibly myths and folk tales, more probably pure pictorial reportage. Received wisdom is bunk! Such paintings are clearly Man’s first attempts at maps. “The mammoths and bison are over that way... This is where *we* live... Here there be tigers. Sabre-toothed ones.”

FOR YEARS I CHERISHED THE BELIEF THAT THERE was more to the work of The Department than met the casual eye. My payslip bore the cryptic origination: ‘Central Government Services’. I felt I was quite close to the centre of things, maybe right on the skin but as yet still unable to find the opening. Conversations would be suddenly truncated when I entered the rest room. Inexplicably complex memos were circulated daily. The work seemed unnervingly pedestrian. Surely it was just a smokescreen? I always chose my words carefully whenever we drifted

off-task and into gossip. When, after several months, nothing of import had yet been revealed to me I began to rabbit very freely in the hope of stumbling upon the key phrases or passwords which would prove my trustworthiness.

Mary was dismissive of my theories. "It's just the usual office chitchat and politics, dear," she maintained.

Eventually I believed her, though it broke my heart to think that the surface appearance was the reality.

Perhaps I had been deliberately led down a blind alley to stop me causing consternation. The real buzz was elsewhere. There was a controlling clique who decided how and when original thought was to be disseminated into society at large. I possessed no map of the secret cartel's location but maintained an inner certainty that it would somehow be revealed to me. Everyone is subject to human error and it was up to me to stay alert and catch the clues as they inevitably tumbled in my direction. It might mean waiting years but what other purpose could there be to my existence?

Inspired no doubt by AA Milne's transformation of his back garden into the Hundred Acre Wood, I passed a childhood obsessed with the making of maps — spending fruitful hours of youthful leisure time preparing ever more complex paper representations of my room, my route to school and the local park and shopping precinct. Soon I was into the creation of imagined treasure islands with buried chests of gold and chocolate. Even as a six-year-old I knew that all this apparent play was leading me somewhere and towards some sort of theorem. During my first year of 'O' Level study I made the mental leap to the conclusion that if all current maps are of places we've already been or seen, the next phase of cartography must be to create intuitive and conjectural maps of places we have yet to explore. These maps would in themselves determine not just our expectations but also our findings.

The maps would create new worlds.

I LIVED FRUGALLY FOR SEVERAL YEARS, WHICH enabled me to take a variety of foreign holidays. I used to joke that I was filling in segments of the globe as if reconstituting the British Empire. Whilst abroad I would always invest in the local maps and guide books. Rectifying their many inaccuracies often took up the bulk of my vacation.

After a while I decided that to accurately map one small area, one space, even one subatomic conjunction was at least as important as sticking 'been there' flags in an atlas. I stayed at home whenever possible, although I still prided myself on a commendable attendance record at The Department. I reasoned that maybe home really is where the heart is ... or perhaps the wood had well and truly been obscured by the trees. I hoped there might be two points of entry to the inner sanctum, one from my place of employ and one from my place of abode. I worked purposefully on this project for many years. I refused to move although Mary badgered me to get somewhere with extra bedrooms for our as yet unborn children. I could not take such a risk, believing all along that revelatory doorways were poised ready to open before me and it was just a

matter of identifying, decoding and understanding the clues and messages all about me. There would be no straying from the chosen path.

MY WIFE LEFT ME FOR SEVERAL YEARS. IN TRUTH, I had paid her less and less of the expected husbandry attention as my various researches into projection, the Earth's surface considered as a series of orange peelings, the unsuspected topological effects of metrication, the incoming 3D and computer technology and the unavoidable crux question of inclusion or omission left me with little time for social niceties. I'd always hoped she would support me through peak and trough but all her glossy monthlies and her permed and painted friends encouraged her to "Go and find yourself." Her search did not in any visible way resemble my ongoing quest and soon enough she had rented her own flat and was attending yoga classes and art therapy with half the female population of Grinchley.

At the time I rationalised it thus: she was an old campaign won through primitive cartography and I had further horizons to scan. After a while, however, I missed her desperately. With the Line Manager continuing to take a stone wall approach to my requests for secondments and special privileges, Mary was the only person who openly understood a percentage of my travails.

"I don't need historical artefacts," was my bold claim at the otherwise moribund local debating society. "I can tell you anything about an ancient civilisation from their maps."

This regularly substantiated boast allied to my conjectural mapping thesis left me in the anomalous position of being a seeming master of both past and future but a lonely, washed-up middle aged clerk in the present.

THE LINE MANAGER HAS CLAMPED DOWN EVEN further on our freedom of expression. I am not to raise the nature of our job or the wider cartographical issues implied during monthly staff council meetings. Admittedly, I am lacking in the requisite seniority but history — even that second class branch of the humanities — proves that many of the best ideas come from the lower employment orders. Albert Einstein was a mere clerk in a patent office, for goodness sake!

I suspect also that Senior Management have instructed my colleagues to subject me to subtle ridicule whenever I stray onto forbidden territory. It is okay to query the amount of time allowed for a washroom break but to pose questions regarding whether Columbus discovered the world was round or took part in its spherical reconfiguration just evokes howls of dismissive laughter. It seems that either most of the clerical officers here do not appreciate the gravity of our task or else my intellectual endurance is being thoroughly tested by my unseen superiors.

Once upon a golden age all the disparate tectonic plates of the world were joined in one gigantic super continent: Pangaea. Without doubt it is this mythic land we remember in our dreams of Eden. One world, one nation; politics must have been much simpler then.

The shape of our country defines our temperament. We British, therefore, are a repressed, untrusting island

race. Back in the days of Empire our projections showed Africa as a fat continent replete with jewels and minerals for us to carelessly plunder. Nowadays we look and see a world map our forefathers would fail to recognise as recent left wing projections by Arno Peters and others show the more southerly land masses as over-long, scrawny root vegetables somehow surviving the clashing oceans on either side. Is it any wonder we associate such places with poverty and famine?

ONE RAINY NOVEMBER EVENING I FOUND MY EX-wife wandering the streets as if lost in the town of no return. She had changed — aged is the correct but unkind word — and even now has not entirely thrown off the apparent confusion blighting her mental state. I might otherwise have taken some pleasure in the homily that she had to go away to find out that here with me is her real home.

"I know what's best for you," I whispered. "I know where you belong. Let me be your guide ... for the rest of our lives together."

THE IDENTITY OF A PLACE DEPENDS ON WHAT THE arbitrators decide to include or leave out. I had hoped that my job with The Department would afford me some smidgeon of this power to *make* the world through alchemical cartography, but it was not to be. There is always some higher authority abrogating all such power to itself. The most I can do is fight for my own little corner ensuring that I am never reclassified as 'No longer on the map'.

I HAVE BEEN 'SEMI-RETIRED' SINCE SEPTEMBER last. The Department deposits an adequate remuneration in my bank account every month but my physical presence at the office is unlikely to be required this side of World War Three. No matter, my time is my own in which to belatedly develop my many minor theories and conjectures.

For much of the day Mary sits silently in a corner of my study surrounded by discarded bits of paper. The writing and ideograms thereon achingly resemble an amalgam of several languages both primitive and modern without ever becoming entirely comprehensible. I know she is working on something really special but I have not been privy to her thoughts since just after the month of her return. I am pleased that she is working and am in no way jealous or fearful that her discoveries and researches may outstrip mine.

It has long been known that animals can travel great distances without the conventional navigational aids so necessary to us poor humans. There are some who claim birds follow the Earth's magnetic lines or the relative position of the sun and that this enables them to recognize familiar places even if the landscape below has changed irrevocably. Salmon apparently follow their own secretions back to the spawning ground. I have never claimed that maps are solely the province of people or that they can only take on paper or parchment form. Indeed, in an age of increasing virtuality my non-copyright thesis of conjectural cartography is slowly gaining belated respectability.

When Ariadne gave Theseus a ball of silk perhaps it magically unravelled on the cold stone floor into a diagram of possible escape routes. When Orpheus was returning from the Underworld did he stop to check his map by the light of cave-dwelling fireflies? Beautiful Eurydice, maintaining too close a distance, stumbled on top of him. He turned to help her in the dimness and...

The rats in the mazes are just teasing us. They know the way out perfectly well with their advanced senses of smell and direction. Their genus is taking belated revenge as what they silently suffer today man will inflict upon fellow man tomorrow.

WHICH LEAVES ME HERE Eeking OUT A PENSION-able living through the British twilight and wondering over and over whereabouts I mislaid all those useless years. Just another pile of question marks on the Sir Henry Uncton portrait of my life. Maybe my 'Big Idea' wasn't so big after all. Dismissed by some snotty university professor well over three decades ago — "Conjectural mapping? Something of a Sunday afternoon daydream, don't you think?" — I have myself somewhat diluted the theory and allowed elements of it to trickle into my conversations and correspondence during the intervening period. Little good it's done me or anyone else.

On the third day God separated the land and the water, giving us need to map and classify. With concentrated conjectural mapping we could be reshaping the present and redefining the future as surely as the original Creator Map-Maker. Instead, I sit here stonewalled by the usual conclusion: you spend your whole life trying to add *something* to the overall sum of human knowledge but nobody really gives a damn.

Nobody wants to know.

ALLEN ASHLEY is the author of the much praised *The Planet Suite* (see editorial pages for our special offer on this ground-breaking book).

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letters

from **Gary Couzens, Aldershot**

A few thoughts on the gender issue in your editorial. My attitude is: as in life, so in fiction — writers are individuals first, men and women second. That said, if I look over my own reading, there's a fair number of women there, at least as many as men if not more. As you say, three out of my five author profiles published to date are of women — not deliberately, it just happened that way. All seemed to me to be interesting writers and one of them (Joyce Carol Oates) is a long-standing favourite. I notice that all the forthcoming profiles, one of them by me, are all of men: an observation, not a complaint. Perhaps my taste is for the yin rather than the yang (I have little patience for machismo in life or in literature), the character and emotion-led rather than the action-led. I'll read and enjoy an action story, but a character/mood story has for me the greater impact. Maybe I'm just a male reader/writer who needs a large dose of oestrogen in his literary diet...

Having said all that, I can think of women writers who (judging by their work elsewhere) could write stories which I would think would be at home within the pages of TTA, but then again I'm not the editor. As to why they're not submitting to you, only they can say: I won't name them, just in case they have been sending you stories which you've rejected!

from **Lannah Battley, Dyfed**

I can well believe that your submissions from women are only a fraction of the total. Somebody once said, apart from me that is, that a writer needs a good wife. Most women don't and even the most undomesticated find themselves caught up willy-nilly in things domestic. Let's face it, whatever natural ability a person may have, the more time spent writing, the more chance of honing those skills. Also, in terms of tradition, women have been deprived of several centuries. Only those producing murder mysteries seem to achieve a similar output to their male counterparts. Maybe the ridicule heaped on emerging female writers in the nineteenth century encouraged them to attempt to shine in

a field which appeared pragmatic and rational

Many women do contribute the 'character, emotion and relationships' which Rozanne Rabinowitz mentioned [TTA12] but I'm not too sure we're any better than male writers in those spheres. In the end it boils down to there being simply writers. Whatever viewpoint they adopt in narration, their work, ideally, is aimed at everyone. In the sf and allied genres I'm sure many women shy away because they perceive the field as primarily 'kids' stuff' Star Wars, Star Trek and Bug-Eyed Monsters. In fact, despite 'equality', we're still aliens in a largely male-dominated branch of society so perhaps especially in these categories we might expect to be welcomed with open arms.

from **Justina Robson, Leeds**

I think Joel Lane [Letters, TTA12] hits it on the head when he mentions the 'relationship between author and reader' being vital to the understanding of what is being shown or told. This implicit contract is in part set up by the way a piece of writing is marketed and also by the way it is written. For instance, you don't expect Shaun Hutson in TTA. TTA already has a contract in its image which says, 'This magazine contains stories which are intended to provoke and disturb you at times, but which will not mindlessly gross you out'. Whereas a Hutson book cover leaves you in little doubt that the content exists to appeal to the most basic triggers of the emotions: 'This book will gross you out'. TTA stories mess with your mind. Hutson's stories hardly even make an impression on your mind. However, that isn't the only factor

The main difference is the understanding of what counts as an atrocity. It's obvious that butchering people is an atrocity. Schlock horror relies on that given. What isn't obvious is that two cleverly calculated words in someone's ear can be an atrocity, as can a gentle touch, a gift, a gesture of kindness, an accident. To show the atrocities inherent in everyday living takes imagination, thought, empathy and skill. Sometimes the atrocity of a brutal attack is not the physical violence

itself but what it means. It is the illumination of meaning inside the violence or the horror which separates the two kinds of horror writing. This relies not only on the writer understanding what they're doing but the reader expecting them to do it too. You have to know how to read it.

I can sympathise with Rick Cadger who was disgusted when his friend thought that he was the kind of person who enjoyed slashfest rubbish. People who like that sort of thing are generally 'sad little horror wankers' whose entire pleasure rests in the glorying of how bad, wicked and perverse is the action in their fiction and it is repellent to realise that you yourself are thought of in this way by someone who professes to know you. Also sad to realise how little people can know you or care.

However, it takes a particularly puritan turn of morality to derive a huge kick from gore. What I mean is, it's only in the context of presently accepted ideas of what it is to be reasonable, kind and good that you are able to define people (or they are able to define themselves) as bad and evil and to glory in their deviance. It is the extent to which 'ordinary' people are perceived to be outraged that makes the actions of the slasher/snuffer so exciting — to themselves and to morbidly fascinated 'ordinary people' who enjoy the sense of their own disgust and repulsion. It's a kind of scab-picking of the emotions. Yes, I think that 'sad little wanker' covers it very accurately. So it is very depressing when you realise that people think you not only read but write it.

On the whole I find that the more thoughtful, truly horrible horror, the horror which lingers with you for a long time, doesn't come out of the black & white moral writers. It comes from the pens and typewriters of people who can point out that everything is grey but the degree of greyness depends on the person who sees it. Best stories are when there is a 'grey war' between characters who are confronting the boundaries of themselves and their worlds and who are right on the edge. Vertigo of the self — now that's real discomfort!

I was really surprised to find that David Curl thought my last story in TTA ['Deadhead', TTA11] was moralistic.



therefore, (since I don't think it is) which just goes to show that at least half of a story comes through the reader and therefore, to link dodgily with Rick's point about responsibility, the author can be held responsible for their *intentions* but surely not for the *effects* of their work in the minds of others?

from **Jason Gould, Hull**

A lot of mature horror likes to take hold of what we perceive as reality and bend it subtly out of proportion — Nick Royle, Jonathan Carroll and Joel Lane spring to mind — and JK Potter was simply born to illustrate this. 'Mouth of the Maw Shark' and 'Purebred' are two of the scariest pictures ever printed: he has the knack of capturing that element in dreams that convinces you that what you are dreaming is true and real. Surely the Iron Maiden-esque covers of horror books have got to adopt a similar trend: Poppy Z Brite's have, which I suppose is a start.

Carol Anne Davis's experience [*Letters*, TTA12] is indicative of many people, and it's sometimes easier to leave out the 'H' word altogether. It, in their minds, conjures mass media images of axes and such like and grainy third-generation copies of third-rate horror flicks being flogged out of suitcases in Camden. What I find more and more though, is that people are enjoying horror without realising it, and for that very reason it's blending itself into mainstream fiction and cinema (how much *The X-Files* has to do with this we can only speculate...). As Joel Lane says, novelists like Shaun Hutson are anachronistic, and the ones replacing them — Storm Constantine, Christopher Fowler, Mark Morris, Nicholas Royle, to name but a few — are maturing and expanding the genre, but haven't been fortunate enough to go through a period of mass interest as we did in the late 70s when every sixteen- and seventeen-year-old in the sixth form common room was reading either *Carrie* or *The Rats*.

from **KV Bailey, Alderney**

I usually find myself well in accord with what Rick Cadger writes in his column, but was surprised to find him

identifying contemporary science fiction so closely with media sci-fi and giving the impression of its mostly being arrested at the level of 'the same tired nuts and bolts-obsessed pulp'. Has he, I wondered, never read or heard of writers the calibre of Greg Egan? Then, behold, at the tail-end of his article, he and his like (there are many such) arrive to receive a brief accolade. If writing about current sf, why not start at and continue from its sharp edge, leaving those sci-fi sweepings for a last dismissal? I suppose it's a fair enough case of the critical article needing prime targets, so that there is no danger of an *Unquiet Soul* being left, like WS Gilbert's King Gama, with 'Nothing at all to grumble at'.

from **Tim Nickels, Salcombe**

Rick's column [TTA12] was interesting, but he should remember that his words are read by a very strange group of islanders on a tiny but very wonderful atoll yet to be discovered by most people. Running a hotel is a good opportunity for observing folk from dawn to dusk. For every Pratchett or copy of *Fatherland* purchased we should grimly rejoice that people are reading at all...

[*Congratulations to Tim who, following his story 'The Last of the Dandini Sisters' in TTA12, has been invited to appear in the Time Out Book of New Writing.*]

from **Peter Tennant, Thetford**

TTA12 looks magnificent, easily one of the most attractive magazines that I've ever had the good fortune to peruse, putting most so-called professional publications to shame. JK Potter is one of my favourite artists and the showcase was a real treat. Having artwork presented in this way, free of the constraints imposed by the demands of story illustration, is most welcome, a vital part of what makes TTA so special. It's a policy you should stick with.

As to the fiction, again your strongest line up to date. Things just keep on getting better. Previous offerings from Lawrence Dyer have been very good, but with 'D'tohn Mi Mahn-Da' he excelled himself. This personal journey into the heart of darkness was

beautifully written, with superb atmosphere and characterisation, a seamless blend of myth and reality. In a much more disturbing vein was Joel Lane's slice of urban paranoia 'Keep the Night'. This one grips you and won't let go. The events, so ordinary in themselves, in context contribute to a mood of menace that is almost overpowering. Tim Nickels's work is not always to my taste, but 'The Last of the Dandini Sisters' was the best thing that I can recall seeing from his pen, an exuberant yarn full of life and vitality, an elegant tribute to a magic time that now seems to be gone for good. More good stuff from Tim Lees with 'The God House', a subtle evocation of love and religious mystery. A genuinely strange story that hints at much more than it actually tells you. Jason Gould is producing some really good stories lately and 'Double Negative' is definitely going with the flow. I was totally convinced by the human relationships in this character driven piece, which made the ending all the more powerful. And last but not least 'Lunarhampton', the best I've seen from Rhys Hughes in some time. I can't help wondering if Allen Ashley's *The Planet Suite* was the original inspiration for this piece of lunacy, especially given the character's name, Alleneal Asherly. Rhys has a real gift for taking a crazy idea and then pursuing it past the point where logical objections are possible. Great fun.

What else? Excellent profile of Ian McEwan by Roger Keen, one that's left me feeling motivated to seek out the two books by him that I still haven't read. I'm not at all familiar with the work of Brian Hodge, but with Wayne Edwards's comments on the superb *Exquisite Corpse* I'm in total agreement. A nasty but necessary book, one that deserves to reach a wide audience.

Interesting comment in your editorial on the dearth of submissions from women writers. There's a danger in making sweeping generalisations, but has it ever occurred to you that women have broader tastes than men when it comes to reading? I know plenty of women who read sf, horror, fantasy etc, but I don't know any men who read romantic fiction, writers such as Danielle Steele and Catherine Cookson. Now why is that I wonder?

JG BALLARD AND THE



Time in works of speculative fiction may, as matrix and delimitor of the action, appear as linear or cyclical. This is true of its incidence and treatment in literature generally, linearity being the realistic norm but circularity invading such fictions as James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, where the River Liffey flows back from the end of that dream-world novel to its beginning, and Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*, in which past and present revolve around the instant of perception and recall. There are works, too, where eddies are created in the flow of time. The high alpine sanatorium of Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain* is in effect a time capsule insulating Hans Castorp from calendric consciousness and isolating him from the world below ('there was no time up here to speak of, either long or short'). In science fiction alternative universes and worlds can be variations on the time-cycling theme — for example, whenever a quantum fluctuation or a critical point in history is a fount from which events may flow afresh and differently. Such a determinant point in time is the triumph of the Spanish Armada in Keith Roberts's *Pavane*. More usually, though, science fiction, with its future expectations and extrapolations from the present, favours linear time, while cyclical time, arrested time and cosmic (or 'timeless') time belong more to the subjective and/or symbolic genres of fantasy. Rob Holdstock's *Ancient Echoes* contains examples of time so treated, as do the novels of Alan Garner.

Such is the background against which I propose to discuss aspects of time in the writings of JG Ballard. He has worked in all of those genres and sub-genres. *The Empire of the Sun* (1984) is a mainstream novel where the action progresses realistically from 1941 to 1945. Its central narrative concerns the boy Jim (reflective of Ballard himself), interned by the Japanese on the Yangtze estuary. It is largely linearly directed; yet, in this span of interrupted life, time is often subverted subjectively, permitting small escapes. There is Mrs Vincent who on the bare whitewashed walls watches imaginary films 'perhaps of herself in England, before she was married, sitting on one of those sunlit lawns that seemed [to the expatriate Jim] to cover the entire country'. Jim himself treasures an old magazine photograph of an arm-entwined couple standing outside Buckingham Palace, stranger surrogates for mother and father: 'he kept the pretence alive, so that in turn he could keep alive the lost memory of his parents'. In such reveries 'his childhood in Amherst Avenue, his class at the Cathedral School, belonged to that invisible film which Mrs Vincent watched from her bunk'. The circular time symbolism of the novel's framing is reminiscent of that of *Finnegans Wake*. Its opening paragraph likens the successive wars endured by Shanghai to the overlapping tides that forever returned to the city the coffins cast to the Yangtze from Chinese funeral piers. In its final paragraph Jim, restored to his parents and normal life and embarked for England, sees a flower-garlanded child's coffin being washed to and fro as the tide invades the river's mud-flats. This, however, not before he had seen the Hiroshima flash reflected across the China Sea, presaging/symbolising the endurance of war — a time-extrapolative element which complements the elements in the story of circular and arrested time. In this novel, then, experiences of (subjective) repeated/arrested time may palliate the relentlessness of linear time, but when liberation is achieved in linear time, there are suggestions, imaged in the 'ebb and flow' of waters and of history, that cyclical time may itself be an imprisoning constant.

Perhaps it is because the River Yangtze, its creeks and floodlands, had such an important and stressful role in his youth that Ballard so frequently

by
KV Bailey

CONSTRAINTS OF TIME

uses water flowing, water flooding, water draining away and disappearing, in his symbolic landscapes, sometimes identifying its flow with the passing of linear time, sometimes with the recurrences, insights and dreamings that aspect time as cyclic. These symbolisms are to be found in one of his earliest novels, *The Drowned World* (1962), and equally in the comparatively recent *The Day of Creation* (1987). In the former, as London is submerged and solar radiation increases, the fauna 'devolves' to mesozoic amphibiousness, and Ballard's protagonist, to escape the drowned world's suffocation (past-symbolic), goes southward in search of 'the forgotten paradises of the newborn sun' (future-symbolic). In *The Day of Creation* a river is pathway to Edenic mergings of origins and futures. Doctor Mallory, a scientist, and simultaneously a shamanistic figure and self-realised messiah, gives his name to an African river which he believes he has created and along which he voyages on a quest to bestow its life-giving powers on the arid Sahara. Where it flows a new and different vegetation springs into being, fan-palms and datura heralding 'the birth of the flowering plants, which had brought colour and scent to the sombre world of the ferns and cycads'. He identifies the river both with himself and with the river-girl, Noon, whom he fantasises as a creation of his own river, and dreams of as co-creator with him of a future in which the desert becomes an Edenic paradise. 'A new race would spring from Noon and myself as we lived peaceably in these forest bowers. It was time for a naming of new things, of new hours and new days. I would name this quiet beach, bathed in the baptismal waters of the Mallory...Port Noon'. This imagery characterises first a regression through time, then a birth through 'new hours and new days', and ultimately an irrigation-enabled (symbolically baptised) utopia. Mallory's entire journey proves, however, to be circular, taking him to the source where the river, and Noon, disappear, and then on a delirious journey (described as like a reversed film playback: 'the whole process of creation winding down to its starting point') to where the river drains into the sands from which it had originally sprung. There the man Mallory waits amid sandy wasteland and industrial debris in hope of Noon's reappearance, certain that 'when she comes the [River] Mallory will also return, and once again run the waters of its dream across the dust of a waiting heart'.

In both the realistic novel *The Rising Sun* and the fantastic novel *The Day of Creation*, Ballard is shaping metaphors through which landscapes are, in their outer aspects and as transformed inwardly, made to correspond to and to symbolise the processes of time. There are in these fictional ploys continual tensions arising between the restrictive and the liberating potentials of both linear and cyclical time. Such is the case also in many of Ballard's short stories, and in several of them similar landscapes and symbolisms to those just discussed predominate. Titles like 'The Day of Forever', 'Tomorrow is a Million Years' and 'The Sudden Afternoon' evidence his preoccupation with the vagaries of time, while such titles as 'The Terminal Beach' ('This island is a state of mind') and 'The Delta at Sunset' announce settings in which the agencies of water and earth remain conflicting or complementary elements. One of the most time-saturated of his stories having a beach setting is 'The Drowned Giant'. A colossal cadaver is washed ashore. Its pristine face has a noble Greek aspect, as of a sculpture by Praxitiles. Successive tides carry the body nearer to the dunes, where, spattered by sand and shingle it appears more like a sadly drowned Argonaut. The body decays and parts are carted off to make fertiliser, other parts to museums and fairgrounds, until all that is left on the beach is the remnant skeleton of what is remembered simply as a large





• sea beast, its wave-battered bones no more than a perch for gulls. Ballard
• writes of 'the giant's surrender to that all-demanding system of time in which
• the rest of humanity finds itself, and of which, like the million twisted ripples
• of a fragmented whirlpool, our finite lives are the concluding products'. Yet,
• counter to this reductive and entropic picture of time-entrapment, he
• describes the narrator, having seen the giant's plundered thighbones framing a
• doorway in the meat market, as experiencing 'a sudden vision of the giant
• climbing to his knees upon these bare bones and striding through the streets
• of the city, picking up the scattered fragments of himself on his return journey
• to the sea'.

• In that resurrectional circularity the sea symbolises the past from which
• the giant has emerged; but there is a tacit implication that the return will
• only be prelude to another emergence, and another earthy decay — a
• cyclical process. Ballard, however, continually explores dimensions which
• might offer ultimate escape from this containment, using chiefly metaphors
• of flight and of light. The stories 'News from the Sun' and 'Myths of the
• Near Future', in the 1982 collection titled from the latter, are both set in
• versions of a post-space age America, in landscapes of abandoned gantries,
• drained swimming pools, an empty Las Vegas, the ruins of time and the
• debris of ephemeral lives and projects. In the stories, kites, sailplanes, birds,
• angels of light, 'a feathered universe', 'news from the sun', are signs and
• means (successful or failing) of escape into dimensions of consciousness not
• subject to time's containments. A work of fantasy which most imaginatively
• deploys such metaphors is *The Unlimited Dream Company* (1979). Its
• protagonist, Blake, a failure in all occupations and roles, but with what he
• calls 'a Pied Piper complex', and having dreams of flight, steals a light plane
• and crashes it into the Thames at Shepperton (Ballard's home ground, 'the
• everywhere of suburbia, the paradigm of nowhere'). Time then bifurcates.
• The plane encloses his drowned skeleton until the fuselage is carried to sea
• by the tidal river, Blake's skeleton then becoming one with a fossil winged
• ancestral creature in the river gravels, to await release at the end of secular
• time. Alternatively (and this occupies the main narrative), Blake is rescued
• from drowning by Miriam, a prototype of Noon in *The Day of Creation*, and
• through, or in parallel with his creative sex with her, and by exercising
• shaman-like powers of shared flight, he liberates the mechanically
• timebound population of Shepperton (first seen at the time of his crash in a
• vision of stasis). With them he also liberates all the town's birds, beasts and
• fish, into a timeless dimension of transcendence. Ballard's novels and stories
• are littered with these wrecked spacecraft, aircraft and fast cars. They and
• their scenes of disaster, as in 'News from the Sun', *Concrete Island* and
• *Crash*, present extreme metaphors, both in respect of failure to escape time's
• limitations (by flight, by speed), and of imprisonment within an
• environment (crushed car, enclosed traffic-island) where the restrictions of
• space-time mechanicalness rule. The metaphoric imagery in *Crash* runs to
• extremes, bodily and sexual functionings being as machine-like as metallic
• functionings of the automobile, and reciprocal to them. Even so, the novel's
• violence and sexual extravagances are preludes to transcendent
• metamorphoses — as when the face of the dead transvestite stunt driver,
• Seagrave, is seen to be covered with fragmented glass 'as if his body were
• already crystallising, at last escaping out of this uneasy set of dimensions
• into a more beautiful existence' (cf. Ballard's earlier novel, *The Crystal
• World*). The quasi-incarceration of *Concrete Island* is repeated in *The
• Unlimited Dream Company* in the chapter 'Trapped by the Motorway',
• when, after his plane crashes, Blake is confined to a wasteland of derelict
• cars by an ever-receding footbridge. Similar illusions frustrate him in his
• attempt to cross the river, but it is out of his realisation of this entrapment
• that the impetus springs to liberate Shepperton (the suburb paradigmatic of
• a wasteland world) from time's tyrannical hold.

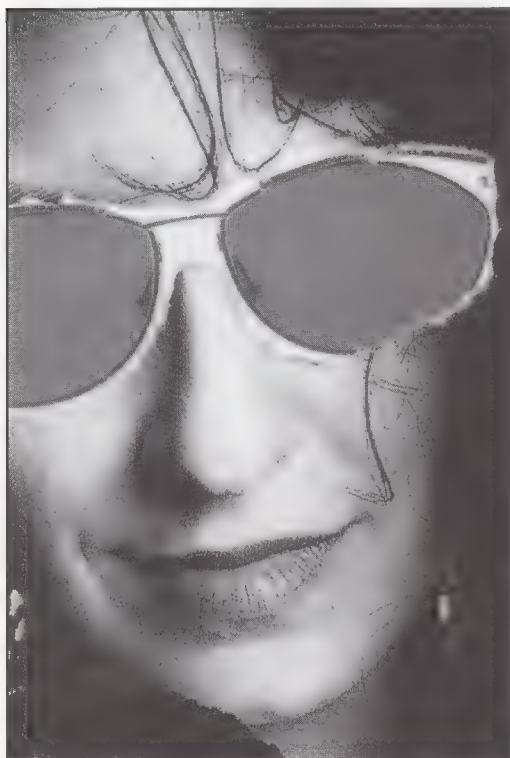
• *The Unlimited Dream Company* I consider Ballard's most intricately
• devised symbolic fantasy. The complex scenario gives his imagination scope

to depict and narrate action in three separate but interrelated 'worlds'. There is the so-called objective or 'real' world of common perception, one of parks and shops, airports and motorways, enduring in linear time; there are those aspects of that world on to which an individual may project memories of the past and future anticipations, these being capable of interpretation in terms of flowing, arrested, or cyclic time; and there are those moments or sequences of consciousness or dream where what has been carried in the subconscious (even that which is genetically originated), and what has been registered in those two previously described modes, come to a focus (often as the result of some sudden intrusion or realisation) to promote a vision, momentary or extended, of that which transcends common 'reality and is timeless. Ballard has described this as cosmic time, and for him it most usually involves a solar dimension. It is not a vision or dream specific to any earthly utopia, yet it may be a prerequisite to the maintenance of one. I would compare this with way the poet William Blake (name-source, perhaps, of Ballard's Blake character) envisaged his Jerusalem and Golganoosha as cities of the spirit and of the creative imagination, beyond space and time, yet full of potential for material realisation. Ballard is less polemically political than Blake, but his visions and fantasies do not preclude the timeless world's interfusing with, and having positive and liberating effects in, the world of space-time containment.

David Pringle in his monograph *Earth is the Alien Planet* wrote that Ballard's stories 'have illuminated, with tremendous insight and a truly prophetic relevance, the public and moral concerns of our age'. True, but obliquely, I would suggest, as in the dual inner-psychical and exterior-social implications of the metaphorical ending of 'Myths of the Near Future'. There, Sheppard (significant name) and his 'awakened' companions prepare to set out to the towns of the south, 'to the sleepwalking children in the parks, to the dreaming mothers and fathers embalmed in their homes, waiting to be woken from the present into the infinite realm of their time-filled selves' — the transfiguration of time itself.



This is the first in a short series of columns in which renowned critic **KV BAILEY** looks at certain themes prevalent in the fiction of major authors. Future subjects include *Mars* and *Kim Stanley Robinson*.



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Presumably you all spent part of March and April with your noses stuck in the air of an evening, squinting through the light-pollution for a glimpse of a slightly smudged 'star'. I am grateful to comet Hale-Bopp for reviving the sky-watching tendency I displayed as a child. Although never an accomplished astronomy anorak, I was an enthusiastic space-fan. My parents bought me a small telescope, and I learned to recognise a number of constellations and stars. It's like riding a bike, you never forget. I am still suffering from the relapse that the comet brought about, and my wife has taken to shaking her head in pity as I set out to walk the dogs with a pair of binoculars slung casually at my side. While she hasn't actually suggested that my behaviour pattern matches that of the stereotype nocturnal pervert, I am sure the thought has crossed her mind. I dare say the novelty will wear off again, but for the time being I am content to have my breath taken away by the Pleiades, the nebula in Orion's sword and brightly-rayed Tycho, the beauty spot on the face of the moon.

At around the same time I encountered a glorious set of images from the Hubble space telescope; vast clouds and pillars of coloured dust and gas. And, most mind-bending of all, the 'deep field' image: a picture depicting countless galaxies dotted as numerous as the stars in a typical astrophotograph. For some reason, it brought to mind a scene at the end of *The Incredible Shrinking Man* where the hero, shrunken almost to the point of disappearance, gains a new perspective of his place in the universe. Ah, sensawunda!

One of the pillars of science fiction is the possibility of extraterrestrial life, a notion which received a massive publicity-boost with the discovery of what appeared to be fossilised micro-organisms in a sample of Martian meteorite ALH84001. Equally important, but less publicised, was the apparent detection of planets orbiting several other stars. Neither discovery has had an easy time getting accepted, and alternative explanations proliferate on both subjects. I have had to exercise a good deal of self-control to prevent myself falling into the credulity-trap that I have accused others of succumbing to, especially regarding the paranormal and 'New Age' topics. I *want* there to be extra-solar planets and aliens. I am pre-

pared to believe that both seem statistically likely; but I am determined to resist the lure of blind faith even in that most modern and rational of religions, science. Not an easy thing to do when I want so badly to believe.

The alien in fiction, both on paper and screen, is a far from satisfactory beast. Extraterrestrials, like the goblins, elves, sorcerers and heroes of fantasy trilogies, have been reduced to off-the-peg stock status. They are available, like Barbie, with a range of stunning outfits and matching accessories, but underneath all the finery we are being sold the same old plastic doll again and again.

In its cheapest form, that most frequently seen on-screen, the doll is human-shaped. Fortunately, due to parallel-evolution, disguise, possession of human hosts, the fact that we are descended from earlier generations of alien visitors, or mere coincidence (delete as appropriate), there is no need for a monster suit — not even an economy model. A

After so many years of writers and film makers exploiting the possibility of alien visitation in order to make a living, it would serve them right if the visitor, when he finally does arrive, turns out to be exactly like the belligerent bug-eyed stereotype they have created

pointed ear here and there, a post punk sculpted hairdo, and in *extreme* cases the occasional latex facial lump...*voila!* A realistic alien. Even at this entry-level accessories are available. Choose from: hi-tech ray guns, telepathy, mind-control ability, shape-shifting, super strength, immortality, ability to restore the dead to life.

One step up we find the slightly more expensive monster-suit alien. A lot more foam-rubber and zippers, and additional add-ons from which to make your selection: acidic blood, invisibility, a tendency to snack on humans, assorted tails and tentacles. You get my drift? On screen the ET is nearly always a roughly human-sized biped with head, eyes and arms in the traditional places. In those cases where a token effort is made to make the alien a bit more exotic it is usually modelled on some other earthly creature: an octopus perhaps, or some reptilian or insect form. In print the physical variety is a bit wider, but the same unimaginative

human-like motives and thought processes crop up again and again.

The superficiality of the alien all too often reflects the shallowness of the story in which it appears. The best we can hope for in the face of such anaemic effort is an insight into how humans might react when faced with the unknown. The truly fascinating stuff, the speculation on the nature of extraterrestrial life, its physical and psychological nature, is not a profitable avenue to explore. It doesn't offer the inherent blockbuster action-value of Larry Niven's space-elephant invasions and space-newt infestations. There isn't much scope for cramming a movie with money-spinning special FX unless you're gonna have a *war* with the alien. Cinema audiences certainly don't want thought-provoking sf, they want to see the American president shooting down flying saucers. Oh, where are the Krell of yesteryear?

After so many years of writers and film makers exploiting the possibility of alien visitation in order to make a living, it would serve them right if the visitor, when he finally does arrive, turns out to be exactly like the belligerent bug-eyed stereotype they have created. It won't really matter; no doubt they can find some macho sitcom actor to kick it in the tentacles.

One of the more intelligent alien contact novels I have read is Carl Sagan's *Contact*. It seems that this is one peaceful and enigmatic encounter that is destined to make it into our cinemas, for the movie is on the way. Wonders will never cease. Dr Sagan's popular science television series *Cosmos* was a milestone in bringing science in general and astronomy in particular to a wide lay audience. The author's enthusiastic and non-condescending style even caught the attention of my father, who would normally poke gentle fun at my childhood space obsession — in fact he still does. As well as his 'serious' work at several universities and observatories, Sagan found time to write pop-science books and science fiction, as well as making cameo appearances as a character in numerous sf novels. He was also a dedicated supporter of the SETI program, the real search for alien civilisations. I was saddened to hear that he had passed away recently. As someone in a US astronomy magazine commented, the universe now shines a little less brightly. Cheers Carl.





MY EYES OPEN AND CLOSE UPON A vision of him lying there with blood on his shirt and blood flowing from his head. Sometimes the vision comes at night, and the dreams I experience then are sufficient to curdle the sap of my temper even in my sleep. Now that he is gone I feel like a compass stored in a magnetic box — lacking a constant pole against which to align myself, I hardly know who I am. I want to sell Abraham's Place, but do not know how to propose it to Ruth and Drusilla. I want to apologise to Sheriff Glass and old Hasanoanda, but they could not comprehend my apologies. I had not thought I could miss someone I hated so much.

All unawares, I allowed Burn to hold dominion over my mind as he held dominion over his sisters', and — why not suppose it so? — over that of every living creature on Abraham's Place. I had married Drusilla two summers before, but confess I would never have done so had Burn not demanded it of me himself. His outrage at her pregnancy was, I suspect, an artifice: he must have seen my old name

and respectable job as a useful addition to the family. Nevertheless I capitulated like the smallest of men, and only after the wedding and the birth did I begin to regret my cowardice. I owed him something now: something that I was unable to name.

Drusilla said, "Why must you be so stupid? You owe him nothing!"

"I have to prove something."

"Prove what? That you're an idiot? If being a man is so important to you, let me tell you you'd look more manly to me if you could just turn your back on the whole thing."

When we argued — and it was no rare occurrence — I had learned that stalemate was as easy to achieve as it was impossible to escape.

Despite our many differences, Burn and I shared one mutual delusion. Both of us were directly descended from the men who had annexed this land in the name of the very civilisation which they had been in such a hurry to leave. There was no real law amongst these settlers and no real religion but a sort of code instead, a code shared and masculine



Jason Frowley

Once Were Giants

and all the more sturdy for being unspoken. Indeed so sturdy had it proven that it existed still where it no longer served any function at all. We were filled with frontier spirit, but had no frontier. The very thing that had made great men of our ancestors now made fools of us; or worse. They were the legends we must measure ourselves against — and we were imposters if we did not try and fools if we did.

When Abe died, his house and every possession passed straight to Burn, his only son, barely fourteen then and quite unable to grow crops or tend animals but already showing every indication of the type of man he would become. Abe's wife received nothing; Ruth, his favourite, only the little travelling clock that she had wound every morning she could remember and which Burn no longer allowed in the house.

Understanding everything that his sisters pretended not to understand, Burn soon demanded payment of the debt. He invited me to share a jug and lemons with him, and while I was taking my seat affixed me with those flat and half-hooded eyes above his own stirred potion and instructed me to check — and double-check — his suspicion that the oldest maps showed his seigneurity extending over a certain high corner of tree-grown land which his neighbour, old Hasanoanda, mistakenly considered his own. He set his glass down then raised it again in attenuated salute a quarter-inch out of its own frosted circle on the table-top. Not that Hasanoanda ever used this piece of land, he said, beyond collecting the occasional bag of mushrooms or stack of kindling there. Besides, Hasanoanda knew nothing of spirit-birds, and if they were there it would be shameful to let them go to waste.

Drusilla was absent when this conversation began, but she arrived in time to hear its conclusion. I saw her complexion shatter upon the instant into the familiar pattern that signified her anger. Her body coiled with the pent and compact aspect of a set catapult upon legs which resembled twin poles lashed at the hips, and she flung at her brother a hundred questions in the space of a single minute, each one designed to shame him. What, she said, would Abraham have thought to hear him speak that way? What would he have done? An inviolable spirit their father had been, and he had promised consequences beyond imagining if he ever suspected his children of lying or cheating about anything, ever. I saw how Burn's expression changed during this interrogation and dreaded his reply. When eventually it came, it caused the ice to rattle in my glass.

Abe it was who had rescued the estate from the fifteen years of neglect to which the gaudy young deaths of his own father and grandfather had condemned it. He was a picturesque giant, who set about the task with such industry that, according to legend, he once cut down with his own hands two acres of wild cedar in a single day. He saved the house from rot and infestation and shored it up with iron and, once certain that the edifice would not collapse about his ears, performed upon it herculean labours of demolition and construction. He did not rest even when the house was finally restored, for his next task was to build the drive along which he would eventually transport his bride, and to plant along its borders sedate and regular rows of trees with which to conceal his wedding gift until the triumphant moment when — horse and trap drawing to a stop in the little forecourt — the painted walls and unbroken glass would rise magically before her in pristine and exquisite monument to their union, and to the dynasty which he planned to found.

To such a mind there could be no more honourable calling for a man than to create a home for his family. Even today, in every warped floorboard and peeling brushstroke, one sensed the innocent tenacity with which Abe had held that belief. Hence the dual appellation under which house and estate became known — 'Abraham's Place' — an appellation which they bore even today, so many years after his death. Indeed, were it not for the name of Abe's grandfather engraved above the door, one might instinctively have assumed that Abe had built the house himself, so tangibly did his spirit seem to inhabit its every corner. And for just this reason had Burn blanched visibly and flung the glass shattering against the wall as soon as it picked out the letters A-B-R on the table which he had set up in the kitchen just two days earlier. If Burn's temper was well-known throughout the community, more well-known yet were the sentiments that he bore for the father who, even in death, seemed a little smarter than he, a little stronger, a little more resolute.

Nowhere was the difference between the two men more pronounced than in the matter of building. Where Abe's handiwork had stood for three decades and might stand for a hundred more, Burn's own lean-to seemed constructed according to the very principle implied in its name, about such a twisted and unlikely axis that only the solid wall of the house itself prevented it from crashing to the ground. When I asked Burn why he had built it, he said that he needed a refuge from the insistent crying of Ruth's baby. I remarked



that the baby had never seemed noisy to me, and from the sudden change of topic I judged that the lean-to must secretly be intended as a refuge from a different generation entirely. Indeed, I noticed that it possessed a blind wall where a window would have given out across the forecourt and graveyard.

Standing between the house and the mass of encroaching cedars, the graveyard was dominated by the enormous baroque cenotaph which Abraham's widow had designed and erected during her last years of life: a cenotaph dedicated, if not strictly to the memory of her husband, then at least to that of the legend he had become. So large was the cenotaph that its cast shadow had succeeded in transmuting a rich quarter-acre of grass into barren dust suitable only for the half-dozen hens which Ruth kept there; hens whose lives seemed to consist of a single ongoing squabble over the attentions of a rooster far too dignified to acknowledge that they existed at all.

Sitting on the porch and staring at the advancing army of derelict cedars, Ruth said, "Every day it feels like someone breathing in my face."

"Someone with the 'flu," Drusilla added, in recognition of the fetid and treacly odour panting forth from the valley's every leaf and spore, and which so infused the flesh that to catch a single unexpected whiff of one's own body even a week later was quite sufficient to bring trooping back before one's eyes every moment of one's last joyless visit to Abraham's Place. The heat was such that one might bring five shirts for the weekend and still have nothing to wear on the second day. I asked Ruth how the baby could bear such temperatures, but Drusilla, perched on the step and twirling beneath her raised chin the bright blades of a plucked dandelion, replied for her. She said that Ruth was attempting to teach the baby fortitude; and that if he grew up knowing half of what Ruth knew he would be a hard man indeed.

However merciless the weather, Burn proved more merciless still, and sentenced himself to weeks of hard labour down in the valley. He could no more have ceased to work than he could have failed to call a stranger 'sir' or 'mam'.

Ruth spoke about the day she had found Abraham himself lying on the riverbank in the selfsame valley, his polished limbs thinly coated with dust and a smile slouching about his mouth. The dam, she saw, was finished at last. She stood at Abraham's shoulder with hands on hips and, craning forward, asked, "Are you dead?"

Abe opened one eye and shut it and said, "Yes."

She said, "Good. Now I can pull down this silly dam."

"Do that," he said, "and I'll come back to haunt you."

He had built the dam to protect the barrow from the changing course of the river. He knew the barrow was there and he knew what it was only because a man had come from the Agency and led the family down to that piece of raised land on Hasanoanda's estate and paced out its perimeter with them. Otherwise no one would have recognised it, not even Hasanoanda himself: old even then, who was the last of his people remaining in the land they once owned, and would be the first to die there in two decades, or three.

Burn claimed the dam was an eyesore, and had every intention of allowing the stormwaters to rip him one complete doorway into the barrow. "A thing doesn't become sacred," he argued, "just because it occupies the same spot on the map for a couple of years." Besides, who could put a price on the treasures that such a wound might yield up? Whatever resentment we felt at Burn's proposal, we did not dare to argue for long. The dam would be destroyed; the barrow annexed; the spirit-birds seized!

Abraham's Place had become Burn's kingdom: a country so inaccessible that even the sheriff said he would hate to have to travel there to investigate anything less than the triple homicide of which he expected to hear news any day now. Sheriff Glass had come into the county offices at lunchtime while I was examining local maps, and if he noticed the awkwardness with which I greeted him he made no mention of it. As a lay-preacher the sheriff was well-known for the incisive and measured oration which had won him many converts among those whom the hell-fire excesses of his colleagues failed to touch. Indeed, it says much for the latent strength of my own lapsed faith that on seeing him I immediately felt myself commencing to form an apology for participating in Burn's séance the previous night.

Truth, Burn commanded more respect than liking even in town: whatever his personal failings, he remained his father's son and the richest man any of us knew. Outside the family the sheriff was the only man I had ever heard criticise him directly, and I hoped that he would not do so again. Today however he appeared more interested in Ruth than Burn.

"They never did catch the man who give her that child," he said. "Wish I could've

caught him myself. That Ruth's a pretty good girl I'd say."

"I never met him either," I said.

"No. They're few and far between who met him I reckon. What they say his name was again?"

"Adam she called him."

"Adam is it? You sure? I seem to call to mind someone by the name of Ike, or Isaac."

"Ike, no. Adam she said."

He removed his hat and scratched his head deliberately as a character in a cartoon, then replaced his hat and pushed into my eyes the sharp glints of light in his own.

"Well," he said, "I reckon she'd know his name if anybody did. Funny though how the name Ike seems to come to mind. I wonder who it was was named Ike if it weren't him." His eyes cut to the empty middle-distance with an expression so guileless that I knew I must begin talking about something else quickly, or perhaps Burn's name would arise.

I told him that Ruth's rooster was sick, its eyes and feathers and voice grown dull and brittle as those of a far older bird. This topic being of no interest to either of us, I expounded upon it at great and tedious length. The sheriff soon turned to the topic of the weather. He said he would not be surprised to see a storm this evening and I agreed. We sometimes did have storms in summer, he said, and I said I remembered the storm we had a few years ago. The sheriff remembered it too — certainly did. When finally he left, I scratched my itching neck and underarms and bit my lips.

I passed the entire afternoon at my office window with my eyes on the horizon; the hills hovering there pale and intangible as a breath blown from the sky. I thought of Abe and Burn, Ruth and Drusilla. I took my car and drove into the hills and sat alone on the grass, watching shadows encroach upon the valley. Thin clouds scudded quickly overhead as if drawn mechanically, and in their flickering light I saw the dust-track below come momentarily clean and livid as a scar upon the earth, and visible about it teepee-rings etched into the rock by the passing of a nation now almost extinct. The intermittent wind lifted a tracery of dust from the track and in its failing swirl I saw the mounted ghosts of those who had come this way before, and the ghosts, too, of their own ghosts. Ghosts alone were visible — ghosts and land — and not a building or road or another human being. From my primal perch I understood why others still believed in the ancient anthropomorphic spirits of trees and water, and the spirit-birds who came from the clouds to exterminate the enemies of those warlike people

who had conjured them into existence. Spirit-birds, which, in their carved form, now exerted their power over the land's new owners by achieving prices so unfathomable as to command press coverage of their every sale at auction.

Back in my car I tapped out stuttering figures on the steering-wheel, fiddled with the radio, flicked it off once I had discovered an audible signal. I started the engine and inched forward until I could perceive the path canescent again among the shadows, then turned and drove away. It was dangerous to stare too long into a place so haunted by the ghosts of another people. It would be easy to become possessed — by the ghosts themselves and by the intellect which had brought them into existence. The nations saw each day as a refined reflection of the previous day; time itself as a maze of mirrors, cryptically geometric. A nice notion, this, but not a helpful one to carry back into the twentieth century.

I approached the house with the sun running down the sky red and liquescent as blood through water. Pinned upon angled shafts of light, chance elements of the scene — a chimney-pot and its pennant of smoke, random leaves and branches and a small segment of the cenotaph — came roseate and immediate to the eye, while others remained obscure as objects seen through dirty water, so that the entire vista assumed the aspect of some amateur stage-set, viewed from a poor seat and badly arranged. Ruth was carrying eggs up from the chicken-coop, her pale hair and the edges of her dress flickering intermittently where red light streaked through the trees. I parked and came up into the kitchen to find her aligning eggs and implements in neat twin rows on the marble counter, as if preparing the board for some recondite and cryptic game innocent of rules, mercy, or even purpose. Seeing her thus absorbed I realised two things: first, that I had come here in search of sympathy; and secondly, that she deserved it more than I.

I came up and we greeted each other and spoke quietly while I tried to identify the misplaced detail of the room. Eventually I saw it. "Your clock," I said. "You put it out."

"No..." She turned, following the direction of my gaze, and saw her travelling clock standing there as if it had never been moved from the spot on the mantelpiece where Abraham had always kept it. She said, "That shouldn't be out. Perhaps Burn..." Her teeth came to her lip and her lip whitened where she bit it.

I said, "Why do you stay here Ruth?"



She said nothing for a moment, then, "Why do you?"

"We visit because you're Dru's family and, you know..."

"Well then," she said. "Pass the sieve."

At that moment the baby — for the first time I could remember — commenced to howl, so loud that I fumbled and nearly dropped the sieve. Ruth looked at me and brushed her floury hands on her apron. As she passed, her shirt brushed mine and a filament of hair adhered to the fabric. I took the hair between my fingers and turned it slowly in the light.

I followed into the next room and asked whether I should do anything in the kitchen. Ruth shook her head silently and, rocking the baby with a motion like that of a tired worker entrusted with some fragile burden, played the flat discs of her eyes upon the window and the ragged curtain that hung there, fluttering softly in the still room.

Uncertainly trapped between bedroom and kitchen I began to speak, as one does, about the baby: how familiar those blue eyes and yellow hair, the red map inked upon his face when he cried. I continued in this vein for some time, saying how lucky the baby was to inherit such phylogenetic treasures. Yes, said Ruth, and yes and — though by now I had been speaking so long that I barely knew what I was saying myself — yes again. She shifted the baby into the crook of her elbow and with her free hand unbuttoned her dress preparatory to suckling and I turned my head and cupped it upon my palm with eyes tightly closed. I said "Oh god oh Jesus Christ" and fingers went cold and trembling between my teeth and I left the bedroom. Then the sound of my own breathing came in distant gasps as if from the far side of a room, the slamming of a door, and arms braced upon porcelain. My knees ached against the floor and shoulders shuddered in their sockets.

Finally I came to my feet; left the house. I stood a moment on the porch, and watched a heelprint moon form steadily above the cedars as if from the pale coalescence of passing clouds; saw tenuous shadows gather upon the earth as if upon water. From the massed shadow of the trees that of the cenotaph rose like one finger from a clenched fist. Now some faraway dog broke its voice against oceans of following silence in which even the chickens ceased to scratch. In that silent moment I became aware of the sound of blood in my own ears.

I took my remaining fragments of bravery and squeezed my fist about them as if to smelt them there into one terrible weapon

fit for a frontiersman, took two purposeful steps from the porch and stopped. I cursed, thinking of various brutalities that I might inflict upon myself. I knew I would not be able to reassemble my bravery again. I trembled at the prospect of an argument, or worse.

Now I set out upon the path that led to the dam. The path curved with a precision almost geometric beside trees and rocks, upon the slopes on the hills, a line steady and deliberate against clustered graphs, which intersected the axes at the point where Hasanoanda's ancestors had built their barrow; where Abraham had built a dam to protect the barrow from stormwater. The path, too, must be Abraham's work: I could not conceive of wayward Burn tracing the same route twice from house to river, let alone doing so frequently enough to impact a track into the undergrowth. Indeed, today Abraham's path struck me as only too direct: far too soon I found myself upon a rise which I knew to be the halfway point between house and dam.

Here I discovered a low rock shaped like the bowl of a spoon, and I sat down and looked into the valley. I felt like some ancient scribe, tense beneath the weight of history, looking down upon a scene of biblical simplicity and scale. Burn knee-deep in shadow, fighting the dam; stones strewn beside the river like a child's castle kicked asunder; forest-shortened trees stooping graceless as scarecrows upon the burial mound. Above these, shadowy terraces rising with abrupt violence into the evening, and rocks and cedars and other tall shapes scattered dingily about. A glow along the horizon shuddering like some terrible cannonade silent and futile amid smoke; clouds shelving steadily against the stars.

I knew that I would not disobey him. Knew in fact that I was more in his thrall now than ever. Impossible to oppose such a man! I felt shaken as a club-fighter tricked into entering the ring with a champion. I said to myself that I was less than half the man my grandfather would have wanted me to be, and having said it I felt able to say it again — and again — and the pain was less each time.

Of necessity I sat perfectly still. I was pulled in a hundred different directions, and in every direction I encountered Burn. I wanted to rescue Ruth and the baby, but I thought of Burn. I wanted to return home and talk with Drusilla and make a thousand chivalrous promises — but I thought of Burn. I wanted to escape and never see any of these people again.

And, finally, darkness, everywhere settling. I heard the long rush of storm-winds gathering among the trees; the hurried scamper of small animals through the undergrowth. Clouds collided and sprang apart and on the distant riverbank Burn's toiling figure sparked in momentary and failing incandescence against the moonlight, as if of its own brilliance, as if Burn were an angel testing the power of his halo. About him a network of reeds and branches flashed shining and immediate upon the eye like some enormous spider-web glittered by a turning beam. And then the clouds mended and the valley vanished utterly.

And wind too, and leaves and branches commencing to sing with a steady unfaltering rush like some thickness of paper violently ripped. The sky cracking with heavy detonations; thin mists swirling and lifting and falling again in sharp rapid slashes across my face. Upon the instant my clothes and face and hair were sodden; through my shoes I felt tangled ropes of water yanked across the mud. Water slid amongst creepers and logs; gathered in the muddy imperfections of the path and feathered there and sluiced away with the opening of new rivulets and gathered again. And then about my head something else, sudden — a cold rush of beaten air as if some bladed fan had whisked past my cheek — and I ducked instinctively but it was gone, hurtling smooth and soundless into the valley as if flung down upon oiled wires.

The first sound was a heavy vibrating clatter as of some vast tray of crockery allowed to fall. Then one shivering yelp, high as the final note of a chimed glass, abruptly terminated but resounding amongst the rocks and hollows for several seconds afterwards in steady diminutions of agony. A moment of perfect silence in which even the rain hung suspended, then a shattered rush of sound — a flat concussion of slapped water, the renewed roar of weather — and I gained my feet and began to hurry down the slope.

In the rapid disintegration of clouds the shadows of the trees lay across the path like camouflage across a trap, and on a steep curve I lost my footing and tumbled in the mud before finding my feet again. I picked my way more gingerly now.

Against the high horizon bars of light came intermittent and milky, canted like the buttresses of some huge pale cathedral amongst the dripping grey trees. Hanging leaves slapped my face and peeled away like the flicked pages of a waterlogged book. A single branch swept past my head like a punch badly aimed and I found myself on the bank, where the water gathered to itself a pale and textureless

phosphorescence by which I was able to see exactly what I had expected to see.

I put my feet carefully to the turned slopes of the tumbled rocks and tried each foothold before committing my weight. In this way I gained his side in a few minutes. I stood there for a moment snuffing thin strands of rain-water into my throat, then shifted inchwise until one foot was planted on each side of his prone body. I bent, worked my hands beneath the stone on his chest, and attempted to lift. The wet stone slipped from my hand, tearing my finger and crunching with dull resonance into his ribcage. His head bobbed and turned and with this motion came a sudden clot and rush of dark liquid, like some small animal scuttling from his hairline. I attempted to stand but a hammer-blow of wind brought me down on one knee and I grasped the collar of his shirt for balance. There I knelt for a moment and watched the water rushing with supernatural haste from Hasanoanda's land back into the river: the streaming water minutely scalloped, standing against the moon like seashells spread across the dark grass. Now was the time to feel more despair and loneliness even than before; but I felt nothing at all.

I looked down at Burn and saw shadows spreading across his shirt where I had grasped it with my injured hand. I could not move him alone. The angle was too awkward; the weight was too great. My breath drew hot wires through my lungs. I wished that I could try harder, but knew that I could not. I let go, and turned upon my heels until I was facing the bank once more. Clambering back across the rocks I heard about me the first tentative animals trying their voices against the night. For one fading moment, two birds came starkly visible in the sky — their silhouettes imprinted upon the night in twin attitudes of arrested haste — and then, in the absence of any physical motion at all, vanished as if on the whim of some hidden conjuror. I took another breath and felt the hot wires in my chest cool a little. Through a hole roughly ripped into the clouds the moon now illuminated for me the sodden and twisted path back up the hill, and I commenced to climb.

JASON FROWLEY went to St Andrews to study ten years ago, and decided he liked it there. At some point during his stay he received a PhD in Psychology. He spends his afternoons and evenings working in a variety of part-time jobs, and spends his mornings writing. Hence he has a very small income and a very large pile of unsold manuscripts. He'd like to thank *The Third Alternative* for giving him his first publication in a British magazine.



Obsession: The Menace of the Loss of Control

ESCAPE DOOR OVER



I won't deny it, I am enamored with Patrick McGrath's writing. He is one of my favourite writers, perhaps even number one on my list. You might be wondering why I chose him as a subject for this column, given that I am supposed to be writing about the 'scene' in America. Well, McGrath lives in both London and New York. That's reason enough for me. More importantly, he has had a significant impact on the writing community in the United States. The writing community, yes, but *readers* here have not yet embraced his work by the millions. McGrath has been well reviewed in the UK, but in the US he has not received a great deal of press (a notable recent exception is the glowing notice in the 27 January 1997 issue of *The New Yorker*), even though it can be said without hesitation that the quality, precision and depth of McGrath's work rivals contemporary literary icons like, say, John Updike. His writing deserves more media attention than it is getting, so I thought I would shout about it. Let's take a brief look at his books in ascending chronological order, shall we? Not that I am *obsessive* about order or anything.

Blood and Water and Other Tales is McGrath's first book, a collection of short stories, and it is also the perfect introduction to his work. It is an opportunity to sample the variety of which he is capable. The writing is fluid, the stories dark and comic and sleek. The selection of subjects is eclectic and the treatment given them sometimes perverse. I remember the first time I read *Blood and Water* I was proctoring a statistics examination. The students had to suffer through my occasional gasps while they struggled to remember whether a t-statistic or a z-statistic was appropriate. In retrospect, it seems rather insensitive of me to be enjoying myself so much in the face of the students' plight. But the book was so damned good I cannot really feel guilty.

McGrath's first published novel, *The Grotesque*, is a sort of mystery. The story is narrated by Sir Hugo Coal, an apparently wealthy man who is not only intelligent, but paranoid. It is easy to sympathize with him because he is struck mute and motionless by a 'cerebral accident'. While his body is ravaged by its faltering physiology, his mind remains intact. He can hear and see all that goes on around him, but is powerless to rise from his wheelchair or lift his voice in protest. Once his dilapidated conditioned is established, the torture begins. His butler engages in an unsubtle affair with his wife. Coal is often placed beneath the stairwell when sweeping is to be done, or intentionally rolled to face a wall. All the while his mind is madly working out the injustices — real and imagined — that are occurring around him. Only his daughter, Cleo, sees a mindspark left in him, but she has her own problems, what with the death of Sidney, her fiancée. It is a wonderfully told story filled with nuance and suspicion. We even start to wonder about our narrator as the book progresses; is he telling us all he knows? *The Grotesque* is an excellent book, but also a bit of an aberration among McGrath's novels for the absence of unrelenting *obsession*. The concept is there, to be sure, but McGrath really gets wound up on obsession in his next two books.

Spider, McGrath's second novel, intimidated people, I think. It is a close study of an unravelling mind, and as such it is very unsettling. The perspective is from the man himself as he writes in his journal, reflecting on what has come before — the horrors of his childhood — and his lot at present. The descriptions of his memories are vivid, but even as you read them it is obvious his mind has gone squishy. The narrative is cinematic in the sense that McGrath is able to control the level of suspense, slowly turning it up as the story goes on. Perhaps the reason one feels uneasy reading it is that at some point you begin to have serious difficulty with the question *do I really want to know how this comes out?* Of course you do, *of course you do*, but the journey is putting you too near the edge for comfort. Not because of vile, graphic descriptions of antisocial behaviour; it is not a gross-out. But because even though you could never see yourself as one of these characters in the story, you nevertheless understand how they got so screwed up. Even though they may have deficiencies and their lives have been dotted with extraordinary harshness they are not just random

psychos on a pointless path of destruction. And this realization is what gets to you. How often does it happen that you become so involved in a novel you are reading that you actually become upset and queasy? Not very often. With McGrath's books, however, you can depend on it. *Spider* was a powerful step forward for the author.

Those readers who found *Spider* unsettling must have thought *Dr Haggard's Disease* was a plank between the eyes. In fact it has been criticized for what some reviewers considered to be its unrelenting darkness. Also, it is McGrath's third novel, making it three in a row where he used an 'unreliable narrator' to tell the story — perhaps the device is getting old, some reviewers mumbled. It is a brilliant novel, but it is terribly grim. Oh my, yes. It is the story of Edward Haggard, a doctor whose life and career is destroyed by an infidelity with another doctor's wife. The affair is short-lived, but he is never able to forget her. Many years later, after she has died, Dr Haggard encounters her son, James Vaughan, and his passion, his *obsession*, for her is raised again, this time funnelled through the young man. The result is not a happy one, as Edward seems to be falling in love with James, but in truth he is not. No, the truth is much worse. *Dr Haggard's Disease* is written almost as a letter from Edward to James (or perhaps James's mother — the distinction blurs). The effect is very peculiar and destabilizing. The book is as exceptional as it is challenging.

And now there is *Asylum*, arguably McGrath's finest novel. We still have an unreliable narrator, but the author does not lean on the technique to excess. *Asylum* has been billed as a novel of sexual, or erotic, obsession (ah, the theme re-emerges), but I do not think sex has that much to do with the story. Certainly there are sexual encounters, and infidelities, but the story is not about the physical acts, it is about love. And what is love, if not obsession?

The narrator is Cleave. He is a staff psychiatrist at a sprawling mental hospital. He tells us the story of Stella Raphael, an intelligent and beautiful woman locked in an unhappy marriage to Max, who has a tendency to ignore her, or at least not satisfy her need for attention fully. Max is a forensic psychiatrist, and he comes to the mental hospital where Cleave works to take the position of deputy superintendent. Stella, in her distraction and mounting emotional instability, begins an affair with Edgar Stark, a patient — an *inmate* — at the hospital. Edgar is an artist, a sculptor, but he has been committed to the care of the facility because he cut off his wife's head then sculpted it. He is clearly unbalanced, but Stella does not believe he is dangerous. She takes his past actions as crimes of passion which she thinks will not be repeated, especially not against her.

Edgar escapes. Eventually he is able to get word to Stella, and she is faced with the dilemma of either ignoring his communication and trying to forget him, or leaving her husband and young son — not to mention the security of marriage — to join Edgar in hiding in London. Things start to get peculiar at about this point in the plot (less than halfway through the novel). Stella does leave her family, of course, and she does go to London. For a few days she is delighted with Edgar and their freedom, his way of life. Soon, though, his true colours begin to show and Stella becomes painfully aware she has made a horrible mistake. Now it is her turn to try to escape — from Edgar. She makes it and goes back to Max. This is where events really start to get interesting, about two thirds of the way through the novel. But look: I am not going to give the ending away. There are two important issues left to mention. First, we think, that Stella has lost it, that her thoughts and actions are chaotic. They are not. She still has a plan brewing in her head. Second, we begin to get a clearer picture of Cleave's malady, his obsession, and what he is willing to do to feed his need.

Asylum is a brilliant novel, a genuine masterpiece. I cannot recommend it highly enough. And McGrath's other books, too. There are a large number of writers currently producing work in the 'New Gothic' framework. Make no mistake, Patrick McGrath is the best of them all. Seek him out.

ASYLUM

Patrick McGrath

Random House, 1997

254 pages, hardcover

US\$22.00

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DR HAGGARD'S DISEASE

Patrick McGrath

Poseidon, 1993

SPIDER

Patrick McGrath

Poseidon, 1990

THE GROTESQUE

Patrick McGrath

Poseidon, 1989

BLOOD AND WATER AND OTHER TALES

Patrick McGrath

Poseidon, 1988

A View From The Colonies by Wayne Edwards



Even Beggars Would Ride



Peter Crowther & James Lovegrove

IT ALWAYS BEGAN THE SAME WAY, IN THE narrow valley.

Ahead lay a sandy waste, tufted here and there with balls of tumbleweed and scattered with rocks. On either side, about fifty yards distant in each case, stood low hills which rolled away and away into an unfathomable distance, each range casting its shadow onto a greater range beyond. Overhead, the sun was either promising to shine or threatening to set (not being familiar with the habits of the sun, she could never make out which), and the landscape, when stared at, shimmered as though through a heathaze and seemed constantly on the point of changing, of metamorphosing — or perhaps simply shying away like a child embarrassed by scrutiny.

The setting was always the same. It never varied.

And as she stood, half crouched, between the two steep walls of hill, with the vista of valley in front of her reaching like railway tracks into infinity, she sensed again the presence behind her. His presence. But, as always, she did not turn to see him. Could not. Instead, bound by some arcane law she did not understand, she kept her eyes fixed dead ahead.

And way, way down the valley, she watched the cloud begin to billow.

Even at this distance she could tell it was huge, and it came towards her with a slow, sinuous, stately grace that belied the obvious turmoil within it. She felt its power, its strength, the awesome majesty of its travelling. The very ground upon which she stood trembled with anticipation, and she experienced once again that familiar cocktail of excitement and fear that made her head reel. And as usual at this point, she glanced to her left and then to her right, considering refuge. And, again as usual, she could see none. The skirts of the hills rose sharply before tapering off into gentler meadowland — unclimbably steep.

And then, as always, because she was looking up there, she saw the people.

They stood in their thousands, maybe their millions, on the swells of the hills, a vast crowd of them stretching back, a great blaze of colour, a great profusion of bodies. Men, women, children. Different ages, different sizes, different races. A whole world of human beings. So many, in fact, that it made her a little scared to see them.

Knowing from past experience precisely where to find them, she picked out her mother and her father in the throng, and then her sister Charity, and, next to Charity, Mr Cimino from the general store. She knew Mr Cimino's face even though she had never actually been to the general store. She had seen him through her world-window, the tiny knothole in the floorboards beneath the orange-and-red swirls of the throw-rug in her room. Mr Cimino called round at the house occasionally to visit her father. He had a loud, booming voice and the two of

them smoked pungent cigars together and talked about football in the winter and baseball in the summer.

There were other faces she recognized, other friends of her parents, but she didn't know the names of all of them by any means. There was the woman with the pinched-in cheeks and jutting chin who often accompanied her mother to the weekly prayer-meetings of the Denton Churchwomen's Guild. There were some of Charity's friends too. She spotted Frankie Napier, his copper-wire hair waving in the wind. Charity had brought Frankie in one day when their parents were out to see her sister the freak; had sneaked him into her bedroom just so he could watch her body weep and bleed.

But she did not want to remember that occasion. Not now, not here. Instead, she concentrated on the people in the crowd, who were all of them without exception gazing down into the valley, their heads canted towards the oncoming cloud, not so distant now. Their millions — billions — of eyes were fixed on that blossoming swell of dust. As the cloud grew in size, so did their eyes.

Then came the noise. Always now the noise. A murmur that became a rumble that became a thunder that swelled to a deafening, rhythmic, pulsing roar. A sound that seemed to have an almost physical force, rolling towards her in thick waves. A sound that tugged the hair on her head by the roots and snatched the breath from her mouth, snatched it and spun it away from her so fast that she gasped and felt as if she must raise a hand to retrieve it.

She knew that she should turn away now, run, hide, but still she kept her face to the cloud, and her heart beat in her chest, beat in time to the rhythm of the approaching sound, the steady martial drum-

beat of hammered earth, battered earth, pounded earth.

And then, as always at this point in the dream, the presence behind her spoke.

He said one word.

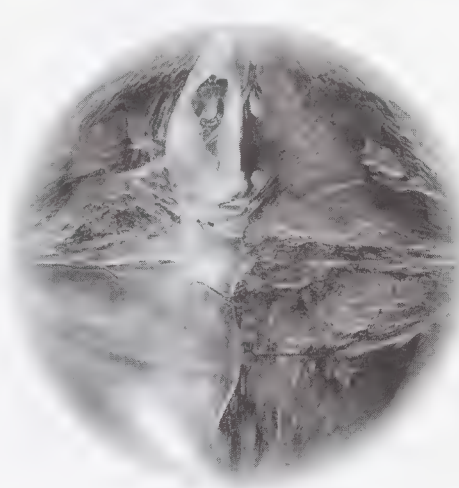
"Serendipity."

And she did not awaken.

Normally she came to with a start at this point, when the presence behind her uttered her name in that eerie hollow voice of his, a voice like splintered night. But instead, this time, somehow, she was able to keep watching the approaching cloud. And now she could see shapes at the base of the wall of roiling dust. She could make out legs, flanks, ripples of hair. And now, at last, she knew the source of the cloud and the roar.

Horses.

And now, finally, just when she wanted to know more, she woke up.



THE SMALL LAMP ON HER BEDSIDE TABLE glimmered. Serendipity had slumped onto the supports

of her upright bed and the armrests were grinding into her boil-laden armpits. It was this pain that had roused her. If not for the pain, she might have learned more about the dream. She might, finally, have learned how it ended, for she knew dreams were supposed to end properly, with more than just the mention of a name.

Gingerly, and with a great sigh of disappointment, she unbuckled the leather straps that kept her standing and stepped away from the contraption. She felt a great yawn coming on and, without thinking, lifted her ruined arms high and stretched, only to hear a familiar rippling fusillade of pops as a dozen boils ruptured and spilled their splashy contents across her skin, the scrape of a dozen barely-healed scabs tearing open anew. Glancing at the undersides of her arms in dismay, she saw pus and clear streams of lymph trickle down towards her armpits, diverting around the inflamed heads of boils both spent and nascent, zigzagging through the torn volcanic landscape of her skin. Annoyed, she lowered her arms again, carefully this time.

Running a dry, tender, ulcerous tongue around the inside of her mouth, Serendipity tasted the steely musk of blood and bile. She was very thirsty. She hobbled over to the chest of drawers where her special flask of water stood, its plastic straw tilted at a rakish angle, casting a straight, slim shadow on the wall behind. She bent and took several long sucks. The water was warm and very slightly stale from standing, but she was grateful for it nonetheless.

"Serendipity!"

Serendipity jerked her head sideways, the motion firing off a volley of loud little *cracks!* as a number of overgrown pustules on her neck split open like ripe raisins. For a brief moment, she thought she was still dreaming. But, no, it wasn't the unseen stranger's voice. It was her mother's, all singsong and sunshine.

"Serendipity!"

"Yes, Mom," Serendipity replied in a half mumble. Her lips were so distended by cold sores that it was difficult — and often hurt — to shape them around words.

"I thought I heard you moving around up there. Is everything okay, honey?"

"Everything's fine, Mom. What time is it?" The concept of time meant little to Serendipity. In the boarded-up, lamplit gloom of her room, day and night were one long undifferentiated twilight. But asking the time made her feel connected to the rest of the world, globally acclimatized, and therefore it was important to her.

Serendipity heard her mother's footsteps on the stairs, her voice sounding closer now: "Gone four. Your sister should be home from school soon. You've been asleep all afternoon, praise the Lord."

Now her mother came into the room, knocking and entering without waiting for a reply. She glanced first at

the newly-weeping lesions on Serendipity's naked body, then at the fresh streaks of pus that glistened on the armrests of the upright bed, and she tisked and tutted — not unkindly but with the air of a woman with an exceptionally unpleasant task ahead of her that has never become tolerable through repetition.

"Now just stand there a moment, Serendipity," Alice Weaver told her daughter, and Serendipity obediently froze while her mother went to fetch a jar of ointment from a drawer. She came back over to Serendipity, unscrewing the lid as she went, and, dipping a hand into the evil-smelling, yolk-yellow substance, began smearing it over the raw patches on Serendipity's skin, rubbing it in with hard, thorough strokes, her eyes and nostrils set tight, breathing through her mouth.

Serendipity did not gasp as the ointment burned into her open wounds, although she could not prevent a couple of tears squeezing themselves out from the corners of her wincing eyes. She had lived with pain and discomfort all her life, but she had never gotten used to it, and she doubted she ever would.

"There we go," said Alice, stepping back and wiping her fingers on a Kleenex. "Lord, I really do think you're healing, Serendipity. Let me just switch another light on so's I can see you better... There. Yes, I'm sure of it now. One side of your face is *definitely* clearing up."

Serendipity's hand went to her cheek automatically. She didn't believe her mother for a second — she was just saying those things to be kind — but it wouldn't hurt to check, would it?

Her fingertips traced the relief-map of her face, delicately so as not to disturb anything. Her skin felt no different from usual, a hot angry Braille of disfigurement. But without a mirror — mirrors were not allowed in Serendipity's room, nor indeed anywhere in the whole house — she could not be certain. Maybe ... maybe her mother was right.

Alice Weaver went downstairs to fetch a cloth and bucket and, returning, set to swabbing down the arms of the upright bed, which Serendipity's father had built with his own two hands. Serendipity watched her for a while, debating with herself, and then finally said, "Mom?"

Alice didn't look up from her labours. "Yes, Serendipity?"

"I had the dream again."

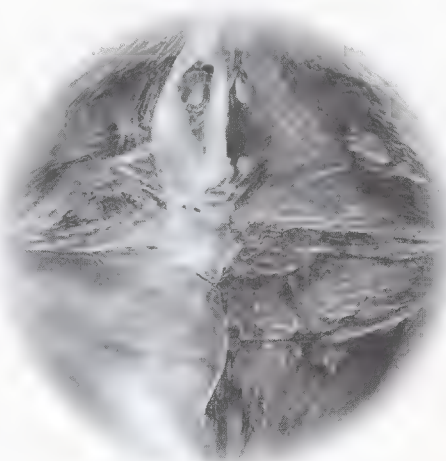
"Oh, really."

"Yes, and something more happened. There were horses in it this time. The cloud — it came from horses."

"Horses?"

"Uh-huh. There were lots of them, lots and lots, running, running like crazy towards me."

Alice paused. "Serendipity, dear, how come you know what a horse looks like running when you've never actually seen one?"



"I have. In picture-books."

"But you've never seen one running for *real*."

"I know I've never seen one running for real, Momma," Serendipity snapped, lowering her eyes. Her cheeks were perpetually so inflamed that she could not tell if she were blushing or not.

"I'm not angry with you, child, so there's no need to take that tone with me. I'm just asking, is all. I'm curious to know. So tell me — how do you know what a whole lot of running horses looks like?"

"I don't know. I guess I just must be imagining how it would look. I imagine all kinds of things in my dreams."

"And that man ... was he in the dream again?"

"He's always in it. Standing there behind me. I think he has his hands on my shoulders. Maybe. I'm not sure..."

Alice Weaver had not read her Freud or Jung, so she did not believe in dreams as omens or as symbol-ridden manifestations of the tangled working of the subconscious. She was, however, a righteous and God-fearing person, and she knew a thing or two about girls on the cusp of becoming young women (she had, after all, been one herself, though longer ago than she rightly cared to remember).

Without saying another word, she set down the cloth and bucket and, going down on her knees, motioned to Serendipity to do the same.

When Serendipity had gotten herself comfortable and everything that was going to burst had done so, Alice clasped her hands together and began to pray.

"Lord," she said, "You have seen fit to give us this child — a mark of our sin, the rotten fruit of our wicked loins — and You have seen fit to bless her with a pure and innocent soul beneath her corrupted exterior. Please, now, I beg of You, preserve her innocence, so that she will not be led astray into the path of Temptation. Keep her sweet and kind and wholesome, that she may never yearn for the sinful ways of the world and make the same mistakes as her mother and suffer the same punishments. Lord, in Thy Name, I beg this. Amen."

"Amen," Serendipity mumbled.

Alice clambered stiffly to her feet. "Now then, Serendipity, perhaps you'd like something to eat?"

"I'd like..." Serendipity faltered. Did she dare? Especially after that prayer. "I'd like to go outside, Mom." She hurried on, before her mother could object: "Just for a minute. I know the sun is shining. I can feel its warmth in the walls. Please, Mom. I'd love to see the sun. Just for a minute..."

Alice regarded her daughter with a mixture of anger and regret. "Serendipity, now you know that's not possible."

"Please, Momma?"

"Don't make me yell at you, Serendipity. I don't like to yell at you."

Serendipity didn't like to be yelled at, either, and she could see her mother's mind was made up — see it etched in the wrinkles of her face, in the way she held her body erect, in the frosted outline of her hair — so she fell silent and hobbled back to her upright bed and leaned herself into it, flopping her arms either side of the upright struts in sullen protest.

"I'll bring up some soup," said Alice, taking no delight in her victory. "And when your father comes home from the restaurant, I'll ask him to read to you. Would you like that?"

Serendipity did not reply.

"It's only for your own good, child," Alice said softly.

Serendipity did not reply to that either.

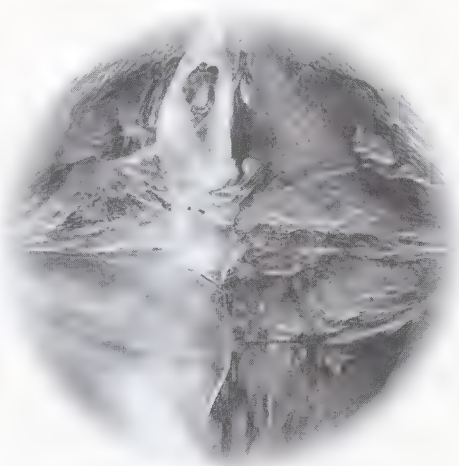
BACK DOWNSTAIRS, ALICE WEAVER RINSED

out the bucket and wrung out the cloth and placed them both in the cupboard beneath the kitchen sink. As she straightened up, she found she was humming the tune of a popular hymn — for which, had her husband John been able to hear her, she would have been severely chastised. *Popular*? he'd have said. *Popular is like that peroxide harlot took her name from the Virgin Mother, wears her drawers on top of her street clothes. I don't like 'popular', Alice, and neither ought you.*

Alice smoothed an errant lock of hair back from her forehead, dismissing the sound of her husband's words from her mind. Now: soup for Serendipity. "My, but the Lord is certainly keeping me busy today," she said to herself with a self-congratulatory sigh and a wide, almost beatific smile. For the briefest of moments, she considered adding *Praise be His Name!*, but decided against it. He might feel she was trying to ingratiate herself with Him, and that would never do.

As she moved into the living room to get a can of consommé — the only soup her daughter could eat without taking half of her throat-lining off in the process — Alice glanced up at a wire coathanger nailed to the main wall. The hook did not curve smoothly as coathanger hooks should. It showed signs of having been bent into a point and then back to its former shape. The hypotenuse of the wire triangle itself was not perfectly straight either, but bowed slightly in the middle.

The coathanger formed the centrepiece of a triptych: on its left hung a hand-painted resin figurine of Our Lord, His arms raised in supplication; on its right, the hand-embroidered plaque that Alice's husband's mother had given them to celebrate their wedding. OUR HOME IS JESUSES HOME, the plaque read in Gothic script, all curlicues and ornate swirls. Alice no longer winced when she read the grammatical glitch. As John had told her, it was only the sentiment behind the words that was of any importance.



Alice, it had to be said, had little time for John's mother, the matriarch of the twelve-strong Weaver clan. Alice tried not to think bad thoughts about anyone, but if she were ever able to make an exception to that rule, then Hope Weaver was it. After all, no matter what John said, the only person really to blame for Serendipity's condition was none other than Hope Weaver.

Alice had not been what most folks would call 'into religion' until she met John. What she *was* into in those days — she thought of it now, with some shame, as her 'former life' — was boys and, more importantly, those clever little gizmos that boys kept shuttered up beneath their trouser-zippers. And it had to be said that John Weaver's gizmo was the best that Alice had ever clapped eyes (and hands, and mouth) on.

But there was a catch. John always insisted that she get down on her knees and praise the Lord before he would share any of his gizmo with her. At first, Alice found the practice ludicrous but John would get her so all fired up with his hands that pretty soon she'd have prayed to the Pillsbury Dough Boy just to get a slice of *that* particular meat.

Smiling furtively to herself, Alice opened the tall cupboard door and scanned the shelf for consommé. She found it behind a jar of strawberry jelly that had developed some kind of mould on its top. She would have to remember to throw that jar out, but not right now. What was it Pastor Stope had said only last Sunday? One thing at a time, good people. Keep one thing in your head at a time. Cluttering up the mind with too many thoughts means that not a one of them gets acted on properly. To which the congregation had replied, *Amen to that!* And there was no denying it.

On the way back to the kitchen, Alice stopped at the old dresser they had bought in a house clearance sale — their first item of furniture after a bed — and stared at the framed photograph that rested on the top, a portrait of John's mother, stiffly posed.

Hope Weaver had wanted her son to be a preacherman, following in the footsteps of her younger brother Joseph. For a time at least, John had been comfortable with that plan, making regular visits to the First Baptist Church in Alba, a small Alabama town off Route 84 which was a repository of the sort of *ante bellum* courtliness for which the South was once renowned.

Then Alice started accompanying John on his weekly church visits, slowly inveigling herself into the church-going way of life and becoming a regular face among the congregation. She went because John wanted her to go and because it was a chance to be close to him. The service itself meant nothing to her, although once, in a spirit of mischief, she decided to respond to one of old Pastor Bradlee's altar calls, and clambered to her feet, reached out her arms and shouted, *You're it, Lord!*, as though she

was playing a game of tag and had just brushed the hem of His celestial robe.

Almost immediately, the congregation took up the theme and, with much shouting and clapping, cried one after another, *You are it, Lord!* and *Yes, You are it!* It was a glorious instance of undetected sedition, and when it was Alice's and John's turn to shake Pastor Bradlee's hand at the end of the service, the grinning Pastor clapped each of them on the shoulder and grabbed hold of John's head like he was about to yank it right off his shoulders. Alice and John left that church feeling as high as kites in a spring wind.

And it was that afternoon, in John's 1968 Mustang, parked overlooking Fenton's Ridge, that John's gizmo dumped what was to become Serendipity into Alice's body, while Alice was shaking and trembling with the purest and fieriest excitement she had ever known.

They had started out, as usual, with Alice on her knees giving praise to the Lord, and then she had set to fumbling with John's zipper and fetched out the gizmo that nestled inside and, stroking it, had sighed *You are it!* And John

had laughed — against his better judgment, Alice was sure — but anyway, she'd sighed some more, even given his gizmo a good licking a few times until it had grown nice and hard, and then she had pulled off her panties and plonked herself right down on top of it, kissing John Weaver forcefully enough to near on break his jaw, all the time telling him that he, too, was it.

The way she had felt right then, with a mountainside of boulders cascading down her insides and a volcano erupting up into her ribs, everyone and everything was it.

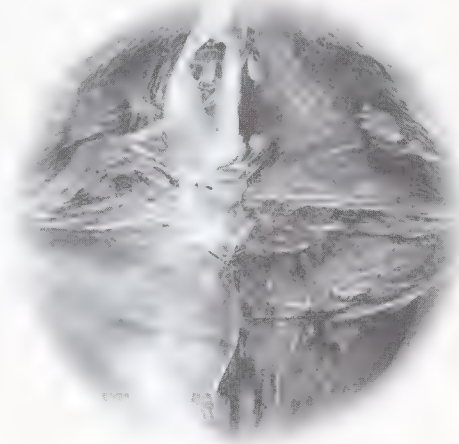
Alice glanced back at the coat-hanger and felt regret wash over her. It was a special kind of regret, and it made her feel itchy and infuriated, the way people feel when they are confronted with the mistakes of their past which they cannot change, no matter how hard they wish they could.

She had been near enough eight months gone when it happened.

John had been worked on by his mother throughout the time of her pregnancy, Alice knew, and he just came home one night and told her that they had to get rid of the baby. A baby conceived out of wedlock (though she and John had become firmly wedlocked since) was an abomination in the sight of God and should be destroyed.

She would never forget the pain. Its memory throbbed in her head even when she wasn't thinking of it — like a bad leg-break that, though knitted, takes on the changes in the weather like a barometer.

Ignoring all her protestations, John had had her lay on the bed on top of some old sheets he used to lie on when he worked on his car. She smelled the ghosts of old oil and rusting metal drifting up between her spread legs



like an omen of bad things to come and of dirt that you can never remove no matter how many times you wash something. Then he got down on his knees, reached in and began working away with the twisted, adapted coat-hanger.

Alice shook her head and clucked her tongue against the stark silence of the house. She walked determinedly into the kitchen, tossing the can of consommé in her hand.

As she was working on the lid of the can with the can-opener, she cut her finger slightly. With a mild curse, she turned on the faucet and held her finger under the stream of cold water. There was barely a droplet of blood, but as she leaned against the edge of the sink and watched the water swirling down the drainage hole, her mind went back to another drainage hole, the one in Alba. Then, the water had been bright scarlet...

The baby had come out with a rush that they hadn't been expecting at all. Hell, they hadn't even been expecting a baby, let alone the force with which Alice's body fired it into the world. But if they had have been expecting it, they wouldn't have expected it to look ... well, *human*.

If anything, they kind of expected a piece of meat: no head, no arms or legs. But the lump that slipped fluently and rubberily from Alice's womb had all of those and more. It had dozens upon dozens of cuts and scratches all over it, courtesy of John's clumsy probing, poking and prodding with the coathanger.

And Alice had leapt up from the bed and the oily, bloodstained sheets, her insides feeling as though she had been gut-shot, and clutching the tiny bloody bundle in her arms she staggered into the bathroom where she all but fell into the bath, and John hurried behind her along the corridor, whining, begging her forgiveness, peppering her name and that of the Good Lord into a droning cadence until eventually he slipped into tongue-speak. (Glossolalia, she had since discovered it was called, from constant readings of the Good Book, particularly the section in Apostles 2:1-4.)

As soon as the little bundle moved of its own accord, still joined to Alice by means of a gray and ravelled rope that looked just the way she imagined an intestine to look, Alice had set about trying to clean the marks off their daughter with a facecloth. Her husband, snapped out of his self-induced trance by an Alice-inflicted slap, joined in. But some marks don't clean too easily — not least those administered with the point of a wire coathanger.

Over the next few days, the couple had applied all manner of lotions and creams to the child's many wounds; introduced no end of potions and remedies into the baby's evening bottle ... all without success. In fact, quite the reverse happened: tiny Serendipity's condition worsened. And finally, on one hot night when even the walls of their tiny apartment seemed to be sweating, John made the pronouncement that he considered the baby's con-

dition to be a punishment from God Himself. Furthermore (he had continued in that relentless monotone he used when he would brook no arguments), they would have to leave Alba and set up home somewhere else, somewhere where nobody would know they even had a child. Only then would they be able to continue with their lives and apply themselves still harder to the Lord's business.

Alice had initially been unsure but it did seem the solution to their problems. And so, one night, they left Alba, John having withdrawn from the bank what meagre savings they had managed to put together over the past few months since their hurried wedding. They went without a word to anyone, not even to the mighty matriarch Hope Weaver herself. (Alice would never forget her husband's face that night as he stared out through the windshield of his old Mustang at the road ahead, tears streaking his cheeks and his lips seemingly forever moulded into the word *Momma*.)

They had driven for two full days, stopping at Burger Kings, Dunkin' Donutses and Taco Bells for a steady stream of sustenance to keep them going, and gas station

after gas station to keep the car going. And all the while, the little damaged bundle in Alice's arms squealed and squirmed and every so often demanded quite vociferously that she plant her nipple in its cloven mouth. Finally, they hit Route 41, a two-lane blacktop that cleaved its way through the northern extremities of the Everglades...

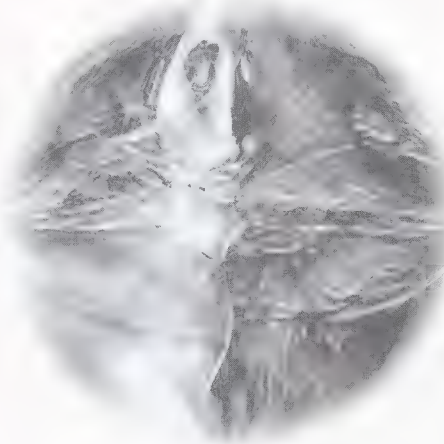
Alice poured the consommé into a saucepan and set it on the hob. Her actions were dreamlike, automatic. She was caught in the full flow of reverie.

Route 41. The dense thicket on either side of that narrow strip of blacktop was impenetrable and

virtually unbroken, opening up only very occasionally to reveal patchy vistas of swamp. And billboards. Dozens of them. Billboards for alligator-wrestling shows, airboat tours, a couple of ersatz Indian villages, and even a theme park with the unappealing name of Shark Valley.

Swamp, bush, tarmac, billboards, swamp, bush... Route 41 had seemed to operate on the cinematic loop principle. It didn't matter if you caught a glimpse of something and wished you'd had a good look at it — there was no need to turn back because it would be right along again in a couple of minutes.

And so, eventually, she and John had come to Denton, a small community on the white working-class side of Sarasota, and they stopped there because it seemed as good a place as any to stop, and anyway, if they carried on much further they would surely end up in the sea. They soon rented themselves a house, only a good spit away from one of those big gimcrack shopping malls, and John found himself a job waiting tables at Sizzlin' Steaks, one of the many prefab eating emporiums that littered the main drag over towards Sarasota itself (and



obviously a conscientious and hard-working guy like John Weaver wouldn't stay a waiter for long, and he didn't, soon rising to assistant manager and then to manager). They were set. And normal family life — or as normal as it could ever be for Alice and John — started proper.

They resolved almost straight away that the world was not to see Serendipity and Serendipity was not to see the world. It would not be right or proper to have God's judgment on them — their divine punishment — publicly known. The world was not a forgiving place. Only God had the power to forgive. That was something Alice had come to believe quite firmly by then. For her, the journey to Denton had been a spiritual as well as a geographical one.

So they kept Serendipity in an upstairs room with the windows boarded over, and they brought her up by the light of electric bulbs like some freakish, delicate hothouse plant.

Even at the age of six months it was clear that the effects of the coathanger would be as permanent as they were severe. But the damage went beyond mere disfigurement. Something — Alice didn't know what — but something on the end of the coathanger, something like tetanus or cholera or diphtheria, some lurking bacteria or germs, had infected that little body. When the first boil appeared on Serendipity's scarred arm, it was easily lanced and dismissed. When the second and third arrived, and then a huge proliferation of them, dotting the child's skin like the craters on the surface of the moon, it dawned on the Weavers that their daughter's wounds went deeper than the skin; they went clean through to the soul.

"We should take her to see a doctor," Alice had said to her husband right at the beginning. But John Weaver simply went into a prolonged tirade against secular medicine. "How about a faith-healer, then?" Faith-healers were advertising their services in the telephone book. It wouldn't have been difficult to get hold of one. But John insisted that their daughter's health was out of his hands, out of Alice's hands, out of anyone's hands but God's. He said this with downcast eyes and the haunted look of a man who doesn't wholly believe the words coming out of his own mouth. Alice had decided that that moment was not a good time to mention that she was late with her period...

Ah, yes, she thought, stirring from her reverie, shaking off the tethers of her daydream. *The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away.*

He had given her Serendipity as a warning to her to mend her ways. Then, to show that He understood her failings and forgave them, he had atoned by giving her Charity — a child whole, perfect and uninjured. (But then there had been no Hope Weaver around to poison John's mind, had there? And no botched abortion by coathanger either.)

Charity — now where *was* that girl? She should have been home a whole half-hour ago.

Alice's smile was quiet and bitter. She knew how Charity was ashamed of her parents and particularly of her secret sister. Often the girl dawdled on her way back from school, hung around with her friends near the mall, stopped off at a neighbour's for cookies — did anything, in fact, except hurry. It was, Alice appreciated, a terrible burden on a child so young to have to live with the evidence of her parents' sin, to have to keep the secret hidden from her friends (and Alice was sure her younger daughter had never told *anyone* about Serendipity...), to have to lie and dissemble and deny. It was hard and it was cruel. But it had to be.

The consommé began to sizzle at the brim of the saucepan. Alice snapped off the gas. She poured the clear brown soup into a shallow bowl and set this on a plastic tray which was decorated with a reproduction of Michaelangelo's *The Last Supper*. Meat-scented steam twisted up from the surface of the soup.

Carrying the tray through the living-room, Alice paused to look again at the coathanger on the wall, with the crucified Lord on its left and John's mother's wedding gift on its right. Visitors — though, by necessity, there were precious few — sometimes remarked on this peculiar wall-ornament and questioned the significance of its position, but Alice and John simply gave out an airy laugh and said it was only a coathanger without any coats hanging on it, and it was hanging there because that was where it was supposed to hang. They put on a convincing show of making light of it, and the matter was seldom pursued any further.

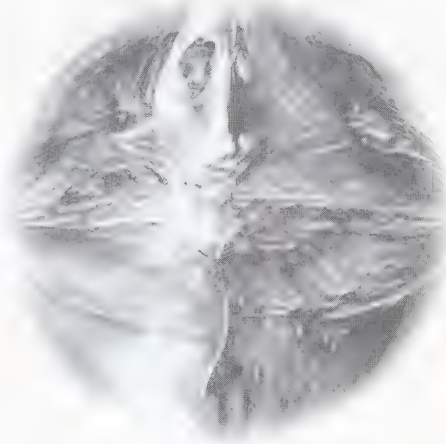
But, to Alice, the coathanger embodied not only the damage done to their marriage but also its restored wholeness. It was a homespun symbol of domestic resurrection.

Careful not to spill a drop of the consommé, Alice bent forwards, went up on tiptoes, stretched her neck and planted a kiss on the coathanger's distended hook. It was a kiss of gratitude, and a kiss that begged deliverance.

Please, Lord, she thought, be slow to visit your judgment on us again.

Then she took the tray upstairs, knocked lightly on the door of Serendipity's room — which, despite the fact that the door was always locked, Alice and John did simply as a matter of courtesy — turned the key while balancing the tray against the doorjamb, and went in.

Serendipity was asleep again, slouched in her upright bed, her chin lolling on her breastbone and her chest heaving deep sighs. In repose — one would hardly use the word 'rest' to describe such an awkward posture — she looked calm and content and free from the pain that dogged her waking life. The agony was erased from her face. Even the redness of her sores seemed less angry.



Gently, Alice set the tray down on the bedside table and padded out of the room, easing the door shut behind her and locking it again as quietly as she could.

Charity would be home soon. John would be home soon. She had done all she needed to do today as far as Serendipity was concerned. Time to be a proper mother again, a proper wife.

On her way downstairs, Alice found herself humming the tune of that popular hymn again. Well, it didn't hurt to be popular every once in a while, did it?

IN THE WINDLESS VALLEY, BENEATH THE hesitant sun, in the shadow of the crowded hills, Serendipity stood and watched and waited. Her eyes — and the eyes of the world — were trained on the distant dust-cloud. Knowing now the true source of that purling white column, she was able to make out the horses at its base much earlier. Hundreds of them filled the width of the valley from wall to wall, as tiny as ants, their legs shimmering beneath them as they galloped.

Behind her the presence watched, too. The chill of his aura of indifference was almost tangible. How could he remain unaffected by such a breathtaking sight? Who was he?

"Serendipity."

Now she felt his hands on her shoulders. This had never happened before, even though she thought it might have and had told her mother so. A recurring dream was a very confusing thing. She felt that she knew all of this one, even though she had never yet experienced it right through to the end. It was like a story that was being told once rather than over and over again, and each time she entered at the beginning but then left slightly later than the last time. She was there again and again, even though she was only there once. Very strange.

The stranger's hands weighed nothing. She glanced at the one on her right shoulder, saw its fingers softly kneading her skin. And as she watched, she saw shapes and images scurry across the dark and weathered skin of that hand, like tiny insects burrowing beneath the flesh, hiding playfully from would-be prying eyes. Once or twice, she thought she recognized something, something she had maybe seen in one of her books, but it was gone as quick as it came. It was then that Serendipity noticed that her own skin was whole and unblemished. She raised her arms in astonishment, dislodging the stranger's grasp, and examined them from armpit to fingertip. Not a wart, not a mole, not a scratch or spot on them. Her skin was as pink and as shiny as her sister's.

Serendipity looked down at herself. There wasn't a mark on her entire body.

It was like a wish come true.

"No, that isn't your wish," the presence said as if in answer to her unspoken thought (or maybe she *had* spoken it — it was hard to tell what constituted talking and what not in a dream). "I have no idea what your wish is but, whatever it is, it has not yet arrived."

She turned to face him. The force that had been holding her immobile before — the strict choreography of the dream, the script it must follow — no longer bound her. She looked up at him. At first, she thought it was her father, somehow spirited away from the house in Denton to come and ask her why she was out of her room, but then his face seemed to shift. He was tall and gentle looking and his eyes were heavy-lidded, like he was tired ... but the rest of his face looked so alert ... and his eyes! His eyes sparkled like diamonds, catching different colours on their edges and reflecting them onto her upturned face. He was dressed like her father — and maybe that accounted for some of her early confusion: it must have because, truth to tell, he didn't look anything like John Weaver at all — when he wore his restaurant manager's uniform, a simple two-piece suit. Except this suit was not dark and sombre, it was light and airy ... like the sky itself.

Like the sky!

Serendipity looked up and saw the vast blueness stretching as far as she could see. So this was what the sky looked like ... this could not be a dream sky, surely?

She looked back at the man and thought she caught a glimpse of a smile but when she looked more closely the man looked serious.

"Who are you?" she said.

The man shrugged. "I don't have a name. But you could call me 'sleep' or 'dream' or 'rest'." He shrugged again. "Whatever you're happiest with. Makes no never-

mind."

Serendipity frowned. "And where is this?"

"The Valley of Wishes. It runs right through the land of dreams. I think it lies at the very core, but I couldn't be sure. So much changes. Nothing ever stays the same. Nor should it. Some parts have become more than they had ever been, others have become less, and some of the more distant skerries have disappeared altogether." He waited a moment and then said, "Why do you ask?"

Serendipity had no idea what the man was talking about, but nevertheless, she said, "Because I want to know, and I thought you might be able to help."

"Help?" The man seemed confused by the concept.

"Yes. I mean, for instance..." Serendipity could feel the rumble of the coming horses through the bare soles of her feet. She didn't need to look behind her to know how near or far they were. "Why do I keep coming here?"

"You've only been here once. You tumbled here when you were born."

"But that was years ago!"

"Was it? Perhaps it was."



"And those people," she said, gesturing up at the hills, "why are they up there and not down here?"

"Because they are not able to come down. This is the Valley of Wishes, and they stand at its edge and watch their wishes race by. That is the way it is. That is the way it has to be. However, through some administrative error — which I will look into when I have the time — you have landed down here. That entitles you to the opportunity to seize your wish."

The air was filled with the thunder of hoofbeats, in the midst of which Serendipity could hear strange whining nasal cries and loud bursts of breath. These, she assumed, were horse-noises.

"My wish?" she repeated.

"Your horse. Every horse is a wish and, like each horse, each wish is different. One, for instance, is the crippled acrobat's wish for the high-wire. Another is the suicide's wish for a compassionate ear. There are more ... the battered wife's wish for the man she married to return and supplant the monster he's become ... the faded actor's wish for one more round of applause, no matter how perfunctory."

Serendipity turned her head and stared at the blossoming cloud.

She could hear the man's voice continuing as she watched.

"The wish of the captain of a sinking ship to abandon the post to which duty has condemned him; the drunkard's wish for the moon; the coward's wish for courage; the wish of the bereaved for the loved one long gone; the lover's wish for the stars; the poet's wish for the perfect rhyme; the wish of the thief never to be caught ... there are as many wishes as there are wishers. One belongs to you, Serendipity. Find it, capture it and it will come true."

"To me..." Serendipity breathed deeply, hardly daring to believe it. "A wish come true. It's like something out of a storybook."

She turned back to him and this time there was a hint of a smile, though it seemed as unfamiliar with the terrain of his face as a cockatoo flying over an arctic plain. The kind of smile that meant less to the watcher than it did to the owner.

"The land of dreams," he said, softly, "is very much like a storybook. A compendium of all the stories that have ever been written, and some that have not."

"But ... but which horse should I choose?" Serendipity asked.

The man squinted over the top of her head at the cloud billowing into the air behind her. For a second the tiny lights in his eyes twinkled like the stars and Serendipity could feel herself being drawn into them, as though her body were becoming gaseous and being sucked up towards him. Then he shrugged and looked back at her. "I could not say," he said, appearing to choose his words

with great care. "After all, it is not *my* wish." His voice, complemented once again by a shrug, this time the gentlest of shrugs, was more like a subtraction from the sounds of the world than an addition to them. "You must let your heart decide."

Serendipity turned once more to face the stampede. There were so many of them, such a variety of colours and markings. There were gray horses, black horses, piebald-patterned and chestnut-brown horses, horses with white flashes on their foreheads and horses with sandy manes and flame-red tails. Huge shaggy-hoofed carthorses lolloped alongside strutting thoroughbreds, stubby little ponies cantered in the dust of sleek stallions... Among so many horses, how could she ever hope to find the right one?

You must let your heart decide.

Squinting into the oncoming melee, Serendipity felt its raw power wash over her, smelled the heat and sweat of thousands upon thousands of thundering animal bodies, millions of hammering flanks thrusting up and down like piston-rods, pummelling the earth with pride and confidence. And with freedom.

The air funnelled towards her along the valley, carrying with it all the hopes and dreams and prayers of humanity. Serendipity felt the countless wishes, each one mingling with another and another, blurring at the edges, until it seemed that one enormous blanket of desire pounded before the stampeding herd.

A litany of prayer.

A deluge of hope.

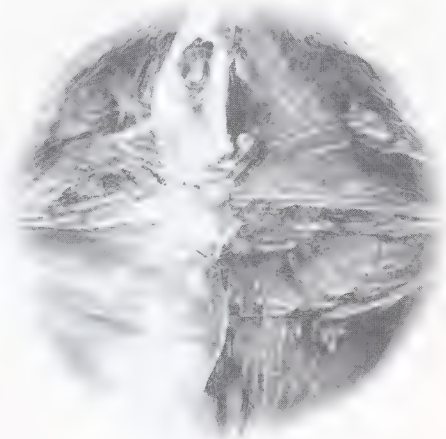
A cadence of dream itself.

She braced herself, digging her feet into the stony soil, holding out her arms, hands clenched ready to grip, to clutch, to hold, and she

stared into the rolling eyes and frothing mouths as the first horses drew near.

She prepared herself to be trampled and was ready for the pain, a pain so absolute that the very thought of experiencing such completeness — such raw perfection — both terrified and excited her. She fought against a deep-seated instinct to close her eyes and throw her arms in front of her face, and instead waited in terror for the first contact ... for surely she must be ground down, pounded down beneath those uncaring hooves, her flesh flayed from her bones even as her bones were pulverized to the finest of powders and borne aloft on the canyon winds, carried up into the watching human hordes like rare incense, the dust of spent life.

But instead, as the first animals passed her by, they avoided her, whinnying and playfully thrusting their long-maned heads against her shoulders. Their voices — for they were surely more than the simple sounds and noises of wild beasts — seeped into her brain, smoothing and ruffling at the same time, appeasing and cajoling, relieving and irritating...



Images flashed in her forebrain with stroboscopic intensity.

There was a sheet-covered figure lying on a bed she did not recognize, an *ordinary* bed, and the hand that reached out to the figure — *her* hand, she realized — was equally alien: masculine and muscled and yet tender, loving...

There was a letter, a torn brown envelope beneath it, sitting on a hallway table. Next to the letter — some of the words of which were typed in red ink, like blood — was a half-drunk cup of coffee; next to the cup, a telephone and a pistol of some kind. Another hand — once more her own, but this time black-skinned, its fingers work-worn, the nails cracked and bitten — reached out in front of her, hovering above the pistol and the telephone, choosing...

There was a man passing outside a window, his head bowed, a suitcase in his hand. Serendipity saw a new, pale arm reach out for the rod to twist the venetian blind shut. For the briefest of seconds she saw a woman's reflection on the shiny plastic slats of the blind, crying...

There were two people — a man and a woman — arguing, shouting. She could not hear the words, only the anger and the hatred they contained. Her hands (for this time they were both in sight) were small and delicate. Each one held a figurine, a toy of some kind, one of which was female, the other male. The hands held the figurines close together and suddenly a tear appeared above the toys and fell down onto them, splashing...

There was a screen — Serendipity thought it might well be a television screen, though she had never actually seen one — and it was glowing greenly and on the screen were two words: CHAPTER

ONE. Beneath those words a small rectangle of radiance pulsed on and off, on and off. In front of the screen she saw her hands, old and wrinkled and liver-spotted, clasping and writhing within each other, searching...

Serendipity fought against the images, shaking her head as the beasts beside her and before her flung their own heads against her.

The horses had cut a swathe around her, parting to allow her to stand her ground while they flaunted themselves in her direction. She reached out to the left and then to the right, first at a sleek brown mount whose lips were pulled back to expose clamped yellow teeth, and then at a black-and-white one whose ears twitched to and fro. But her attempt was halfhearted at best. Those were not the horses she wanted, she was sure.

You must let your heart decide.

The sound of the stampede was deafening around her. It was everything that existed, perhaps everything that had ever existed. The sound filled the world, *was* the world, its energy and its momentum the single collective power that drove things, that lit the darkness, answered all questions.

Which one? her mind's voice whispered.

Suddenly, above the constant dinning of hoof on earth, Serendipity heard a faint whinnying call, almost a plea, coming over from her right. She looked around and there, coming towards her, was a small pony, white of mane and face, not a marking to be seen anywhere on its body. The pony flexed its neck and galloped nearer to her so that it might pass within her grasp. The pony's eyes were dark red, so rich and deep it was almost purple.

That one, said a small voice inside her ... not her mind's voice this time but another with a deeper, richer timbre. One that came from her insides ... from her soul.

Serendipity hurled herself into the writhing mass of flesh and mane, forcing herself into the midst of the beasts, and grabbed for the white pony. It pulled back at once, rearing, and then sidestepped, but she had managed to circle the pony's neck with her arms and clasp her hands together over on the other side. The pony ran on, lifting Serendipity from the canyon floor and drawing her along with it, shaking, bucking, leaping and swerving, while all the time she held on and held fast, closing her eyes,

clenching her teeth, concentrating with all her mind, all her heart and all her soul. *This* was her wish, of that she was sure — the warm weight in her arms. And she would not let go of it, no matter what.

At that moment she felt the horse's momentum cease and heard the roar of the herd diminish. Opening her eyes, she saw the white pony had taken her out of the stampede and across to a collection of rocks at the foot of the hill-face. The other horses were galloping on, but looking back she could not see hide nor hair of the man whose name she still did not know. Perhaps he had become lost

in the dust-cloud, which was even now sweeping on down the valley in a nebulous gray tide. Perhaps — though it seemed unlikely — the horses had trampled *him*.

"Hey," said a voice. Serendipity turned in its direction and saw, sitting on the rocks, a young man, younger than the other one, peeling a length of crab-grass. He was smiling at her.

Serendipity smiled back. "Hey," she said.

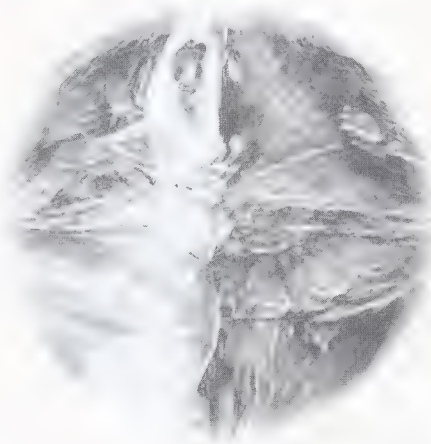
The man nodded at the pony and tossed the grass to the ground. "That's my horse, you know," he said. "The pale one."

Serendipity frowned.

"Oh, hey, don't be sad. I said it's my horse ... I didn't say you couldn't ride him."

The man got to his feet, dusting his hands by clapping them together. Serendipity watched his approach and meantime patted the pony on the neck, tenderly but firmly.

The man was dressed in faded blue work jeans and a denim shirt, opened a couple of buttons at the neck. On his feet he had old scuffed brown leather boots. He joined Serendipity beside the horse and patted its neck too,



clucking his tongue affectionately. The horse mimicked the sound precisely and nodded its head.

"So..." said Serendipity. "My wish?"

The man cocked his head to one side. "Pardon me?"

"He said — the other man — he said all I had to do was catch one of the horses and the wish would be mine."

The man looked like he was trying not to smile. He opened his arms and took a step back from the horse and nodded, smiling. "And so it is ... if you're sure you want it."

"If I'm sure?"

"If you're sure that's your wish."

Serendipity looked at the pony and patted its head. "Yes...well...but what *is* it? What exactly have I wished for?"

"You don't know?"

Serendipity shook her head. "The man said I should let my heart decide."

"And did you? Did your heart decide on my horse?"

She looked up into his face and saw the twinkling eyes, a myriad swirling, sparkling patterns just like...

Serendipity shook her head.

"You're ... you're him, aren't you?"

"Him?"

"The other man? You and he are the same, aren't you?"

The man shrugged. "Maybe, maybe not." He saw Serendipity's frown and smiled widely. "Okay, let's say that I am him ... or that he is me. Maybe a person can be many things. Maybe a person can be both energy and fatigue, Mors and Amor, Death and Birth, endings and beginnings, darkness and light. What is death but a longer sleep, what is sleep but a foretaste of death." He span around, arms pin-wheeling by his side. "Is a glass half empty or half full?"

"I ... I don't think I understand."

The man stopped spinning, threw his arms into the air and shouted, "*Who does!*" And as he laughed out loud, the horse cantered and gave a similar snorting chuckle.

Serendipity joined in the laughter. She liked the way the man talked. She liked the dancing darkness of his eyes.

When they had finished laughing, the man kicked a pebble and stretched. "Well," he said, "time-to-go time."

"Go?" said Serendipity, panic fluttering in her chest. "But we've only just met."

"Oh, hey, sorry...not 'go' as in splitting up. You're coming with me. That's your wish. You asked for it, I'm granting it."

"You mean you're going to be my friend?" Serendipity stammered the words, hardly daring to believe that she was actually saying them.

"Me, I'm everybody's friend ... 'cept they don't always see it that way. So, sure, yeah, I'm going to be your friend. Now, for ever and always."

"And I'm not going back? I'm not going back to my room?"

"Do you *want* to go back?"

Serendipity shook her head emphatically. "Uh-uh."

"Then that's it. Settled." He clapped his hands together and the pony stamped a leg. "No more room, no more pain." The smile carried about it the vaguest hint of sadness, and for a moment the man's eyes seemed to lose just a fraction of their kindly glitter. But this change of expression was like the flicker of a lightbulb; almost before Serendipity noticed it, it had gone.

"Was *that* my wish?" she asked, a little confused now about this whole wish business.

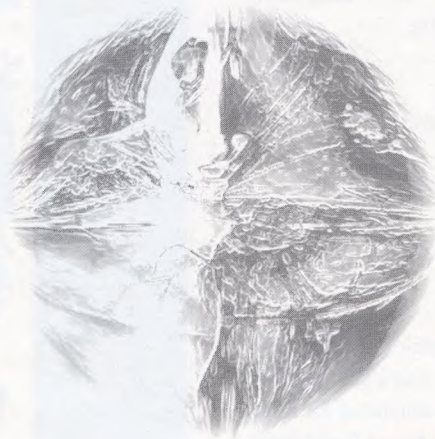
"Freedom! Freedom was your wish. Come on, climb aboard." So saying, the man leaped agilely onto the horse's back and extended a hand to help Serendipity do the same. Serendipity grasped a handful of mane and swung her leg up high, and the man hauled her up easily until Serendipity was sitting behind him. "Okay?"

"I ... I think so."

"Then let's go," the man shouted to the canyon walls, turning to face forwards and fitting Serendipity's arms around his waist. "With a cry of 'Giddap!'," he dug his

heels into the pony's flanks and the pony moved off at a gentle canter with the two riders on its back, heading into the thinning, settling dust-cloud of the stampede long since passed; heading down the empty valley between the two crowded hillsides beneath that uncertain sun; heading towards that point, invisible in infinity, where the valley-walls met and the valley ended. All the way, Serendipity and the man talked like friends, old friends who had known one another all their lives and would stay old friends for all time, two great warriors enjoying a brief and bloodless respite.

And they giggled and they sang songs, and Serendipity had never felt so free or so alive, and she wanted this journey to last forever, and indeed, the journey did last forever, and was never over and never would be, as Serendipity and her new friend, laughing, rode a pale horse into eternity.



JOHN AND ALICE WEAVER SNORED LIGHTLY IN their separate beds in their house without mirrors. But though they had taken every precaution to keep their true selves from themselves, the ebony darkness of their souls shone with such a pure black light that even the most absorbent surfaces reflected their worth.

For Alice Weaver, the dream was of a freshly-dug grave into which six giggling mourners had just lowered a casket containing her mother-in-law. Inside the coffin, Hope Weaver was banging frantically on the lid and screaming, but these muffled sounds did not distract the mourners from their labours or wipe the satisfied grins from their faces.

Across from her, John Weaver dreamed he was kneeling with his head under the skirt and between the spread-wide thighs of Martha Kopek, occasional waitress at Sizzlin' Steaks. Martha, grunting, leaned back against the packing cases of bread rolls and salad packs in the storage room and caressed John's ears and called him 'Big John' with the succulent, listless tones of an actress in a pornographic movie.

Around the rest of the house, all was still.

And apart from the soft snoring and the metronomic ticking of the Weavers' alarm clock, set for seven, all was quiet.

But in a small room at the top of the house, its windows all boarded up and its door locked against entry or escape, there *was* a mirror, a looking glass which would shine clearer than any dime-store beauty-aid.

The truest reflection of an individual is what they have made.

For Alice and John Weaver, it was the mirror of their dead daughter, Serendipity, waiting for them to awaken, spread-eagled in her wooden upright bed, her arms outstretched and her head bowed and her eyes wide open and her wounds weeping like those of the Good Lord Himself on His Cross, waiting for morning.

*I am glad God saw Death
And gave Death a job taking care of all who
are tired of living.*

CARL SANDBURG
(FROM *THE JUNK MAN*)

PETER CROWTHER has sold over 50 stories to a variety of anthologies and magazines. His stories have been reprinted in *Year's Best Fantasy and Horror* and *Year's Best Crime and Mystery*, nominated for Bram Stoker Awards for the past two years and in 1994 adapted (by himself) for British Television. In 1992 he edited *Narrow Houses*, the first volume in a three-book anthology series based around superstitions, and went on to edit *Heaven Sent* (with Martin H. Greenberg), *Tombs* and *Dante's Disciples* (both with Ed Kramer) and recently *Destination: Unknown*. In the melting pot are his long-threatened debut solo novel — *April Fool* — plus a Koko Tate novel, more anthologies and his first story collection, *The Longest Single Note and Other Strange Compositions*.

JAMES LOVEGROVE is the author of *The Hope*, a critically-acclaimed horror novel set aboard an unfeasibly large oceangoing liner. His next solo novel, forthcoming from Orion in September, is *Days*, best described as *Die Hard* meets *Are You Being Served?* His short stories have appeared in *Interzone* and *Fear* and in anthologies such as *Narrow Houses*, *Blue Motel*, *Heaven Sent*, *Dante's Disciples*, *Destination: Unknown*, and *Pawn of Chaos*. He has also contributed reviews and interviews to *Literary Review* and *Interzone*. He is currently at work on another novel, *The Foreigners*, and on the first in a series of six sf thrillers, which will probably come out under a pseudonym.

IN COLLABORATION Peter Crowther and James Lovegrove have written the novel *Escardy Gap*, which will be launched at the 1998 EasterCon as part of Simon & Schuster's new imprint 'Earthlight'. A sequel and an unrelated follow-up are at the planning stage.

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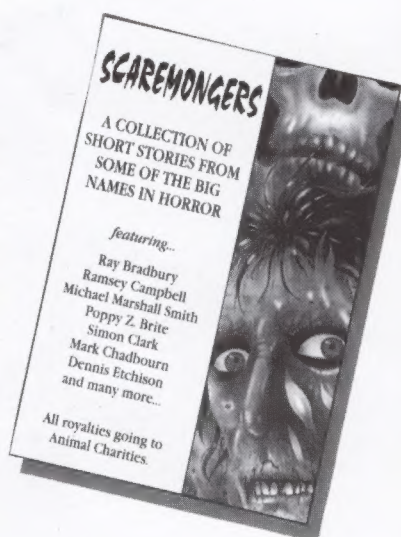
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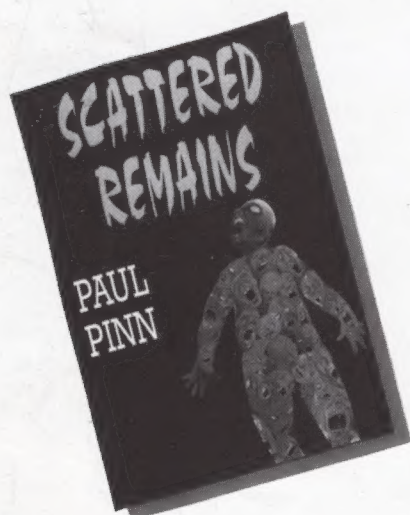
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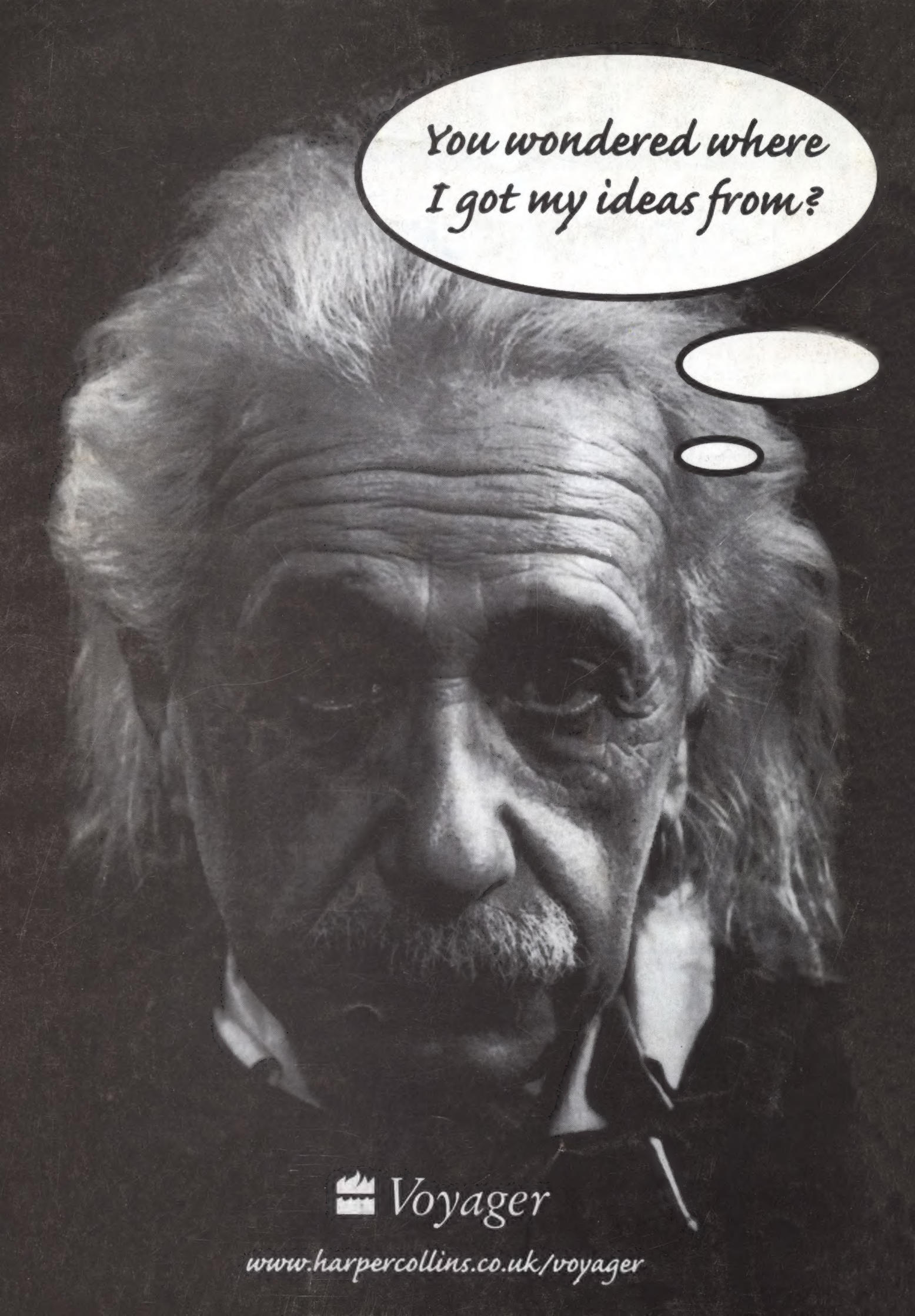
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